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BROWNING'S TEACHING ON
FAITH, LIFE AND LOVE



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BROWNING'S TEACHING
ON
FAITH, LIFE AND LOVE

BY
W. ARTHUR HIND

LONDON
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TO
MY WIFE

Take (it), Love, the book and me together :
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

333416

PREFATORY NOTE

THIS little book has been written with the object of introducing the poetry of Robert Browning to some of those who have not hitherto been numbered amongst his readers. It is an attempt to interpret his message to those whom his voice has not yet reached. It does not aspire to rank as an essay in criticism. It makes no pretence of erudition. There is nothing in it that will appeal to the Browning scholar as fresh and original ; much, perhaps, that will seem trite and commonplace. Nevertheless, the writer is not without hope that it may serve a useful purpose. If it leads a few of its readers on to the works of more scholarly expositors of the poet ; and especially, if it is the means of inducing them to commence the careful study of the poetry of Browning himself, it will not altogether fail to reach its aim.

In preparing these studies the writer has availed himself of help and suggestion from many sources, most of which are mentioned in

the Bibliography. He is especially indebted to the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke for his illuminating exposition of Browning's *Theory of Human Life*, and to Dr. Berdoe for his invaluable *Browning Cyclopædia*. Mr. Hutton's little book, *Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith*, has also been a fruitful source of suggestion.

The writer's thanks are also due to Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co. for their kind permission to use the quotation from the Epilogue to *Asolando*.

W. A. H.

1912.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

THE following list of books does not aim at being a complete bibliography. It is merely intended to guide a beginner in the choice of those books that will be helpful to him in his study of Browning's Works.

At the same time it affords the author an opportunity of acknowledging his indebtedness to many writers who have helped him.

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BROWNING'S TEACHING ON FAITH, LIFE AND LOVE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

Browning's Message to the Modern World

IN the history of modern literature there have been many who have achieved rapidly a popularity and an influence which have been phenomenal in extent but brief in duration. Their writings have mirrored so faithfully the passing spirit of the age, that the very quality which won for them their hold on the popular imagination was a pledge of their speedy oblivion. A later generation, looking back upon their triumphs, finds it hard to understand the secret of their brief success. On the other hand, in the case of a few writers, recognition has been slow in coming, but their influence has deepened and widened until, a generation or so

after their death, they have been honoured far more highly by the world at large than ever they were in their lifetime.

To this latter class Robert Browning unquestionably belongs. At the beginning of his career, and well on towards its close, he spoke to a world that was largely unresponsive. Before he died, in the year 1889, he was recognised and honoured by the world of letters, but he was still disregarded in the main by the general public. At the beginning of the twentieth century his writings gradually passed from the possession of a cult into the general heritage of English Literature. To-day there are many indications of his growing influence amongst the general mass of the thinking and reading public.

What, then, are the reasons for this tardy recognition of so great a writer? They seem to be twofold. One reason may undoubtedly be found in certain characteristics of Browning's work. His name has become almost a proverb for obscurity. The impression that his writings are difficult to understand is so widespread that it cannot be altogether without foundation.

All candid admirers of the poet's work are

bound to admit that in places it does present obstacles in the way of facile comprehension. If, however, these were as serious as has been sometimes represented, they would not merely have prevented his early recognition, but would have made it impossible for him to exercise any widespread influence at any time. The fact that to-day he appeals to a much wider circle of readers than he ever did in his lifetime proves that the acknowledged difficulties of his style are not of such a character as to render him unintelligible to the thoughtful man.

It is not necessary in this place to attempt any careful analysis of the causes of Browning's obscurity. That has already been done by competent critics. It will be sufficient to indicate that they arise in the main from one or more of the following sources.

(1) His frequent allusions to persons and events that are unfamiliar to the average reader. He delighted in exploring the nooks and crannies of history, and in adorning his poems with references to out-of-the-way characters.

(2) His over-condensation of thought, and the swift headlong rush of his style, which sometimes crashes on us like a thunderclap,

or sweeps past us with the resistless force of a mountain torrent.

(3) His occasionally involved sentences and long parentheses. Sometimes the end of the sentence comes before the beginning. At other times he misses out half of what he means to say, and leaves the reader to supply the omission. Again, he often stops in the middle of a long sentence to interject a remark or explanation in brackets, and picks up his unfinished sentence and goes on with it again—or forgets to do so.

(4) His dramatic method of inculcating his teaching. He sought to put himself inside the mind of the person whose story he wished to tell, and to represent some crisis in the life of the soul, not as it appeared to an onlooker, but as it was regarded by the subject himself. The result is that often at the beginning of a poem we find that some one—we do not know who—is speaking about something—we do not know what—either to himself or to some auditor—equally unknown. As we read on we begin to understand the circumstances described, and the character of the speaker is gradually revealed to us, until at last we see him more clearly and understand him more thoroughly than we could have

done if the method of ordinary narrative had been followed.

(5) The subtlety and complexity of some of his themes. Browning delighted to describe the play of human passions and emotions and to trace their action and interaction. He realised that in the great drama of human life men seldom act on the impulse of some one clear motive merely; that the force which calls the will into action is generally the resultant of a whole universe of hopes and fears, of sympathies and antipathies, of instincts and resolves. This task of delineating motives can, from its nature, never be a simple one, and the poetry which attempts it cannot be easy to understand.

But, apart from the difficulties of Browning's style, there is a second reason why he has been so late in coming into his kingdom. This further explanation is found in the change that has come over the spirit of the age at the latter end of the nineteenth and in the opening decade of the twentieth centuries.

It is a transformation which is complex and difficult to describe, but it is one of which all of us are more or less conscious. And the result of it has been to bring men more

into harmony with Browning's teaching. The hackneyed phrase, "a man before his time," may be applied to him with unusual accuracy. The general trend of this change in the attitude of men's minds may be indicated or suggested by saying that it is a movement from the materialistic towards the idealistic standpoint, from physiological to psychological investigation, from the analytic and destructive spirit to the synthetic and constructive.

The nineteenth century was the era of the triumph of physical science. A new universe opened up before men's eyes, and it seemed a very vast and terrible universe. It is true that man chained the elements to work his will, but he discovered that he could use Nature only by obeying her immutable laws. Though, in one sense, it marked the triumph of mind over matter, yet, in another sense, it seemed to suggest the ultimate triumph of matter over mind. The inconceivably vast tracts of space thus revealed seemed like some great wilderness in which man's lonely, wandering spirit would be swallowed up and lost. The inexorable forces, working with the regularity of some monstrous machine, seemed like the relentless decrees of fate. In

such a world the spiritual, the supernatural, the divine seemed to find no place; and the human soul was judged to be merely a physical product. Values were determined by origins rather than by ends. The question, "Whither are we going?" was subordinated to the question, "Whence have we come?" And the solution of the latter problem was sought in physical and material terms. It seemed as if, by means of physical science, man had gained the whole world, and lost his own soul. That attitude of mind could have but one issue—the spirit of pessimism.

From that spirit the poetry of Browning is entirely free, and with it he is utterly and for ever at variance. Between him and the materialistic scepticism of the middle of the century there was so little in common that he seemed like one speaking another language, dwelling in another world, breathing another atmosphere. And the language he spoke, the world he inhabited, the air he breathed, were those of the twentieth century.

In speaking of the characteristic ideas and motives of this century, we do not suggest that the present attitude of mind is a new creation, something unknown, undreamed of,

in the years preceding. There is probably hardly any single idea which exercises a powerful influence to-day that was not familiar to the thinkers of Browning's time. The psychological standpoint is not new; and the idealistic philosophy is well-nigh as old as human thought. What we have gained is rather a new outlook, a changed emphasis; we view the world in a different perspective. It may, perhaps, be expressed by saying that the centre of interest has shifted from the physical world to the human soul. Or, to use two words that have been sadly overworked, our interest has become *subjective* instead of *objective*.

That new interest in the inward or spiritual life is manifested in many directions. Thinkers such as the late William James have indicated the value which modern science attaches to the experiences of the soul. In philosophy the new modern position is indicated by such names as Bergson and Eucken.

Nor has the world of politics escaped this new influence. The old political economy and the old mechanical socialism have alike been assaulted by the new wave of humanitarianism. The individual has become valu-

able, not as a mere unit in a system, but as having in himself eternal worth. The criterion by which any social system is approved, or condemned, is the scope which it affords or denies for the development of the individual life. It is demanded that for every man there must be left room to grow a soul.

In the religious world also the breath of the new spirit is felt. The constructive impulse is replacing the former passion for criticism; affirmation is following negation. Whether the development takes place along the lines of the old orthodoxy, restated in modern terms, or whether it takes the form of a New Theology, it lays emphasis, in either case, upon the subjective and spiritual rather than upon the objective and ceremonial. The nineteenth century was the dissecting-room of theological inquiry. The twentieth century calls upon the Spirit of God to breathe upon these dry bones that they may live.

An age that is thus fermenting with new life, stirring with new aspirations, seeking new constructions of experience and kindling with new hopes, turns to the poetry of Robert Browning and finds in him a man after its

own heart. For the remarkable thing is that, to a very large extent, Browning's outlook is ours. He lays emphasis upon those facts which most arrest our attention. His perspective is very similar to our own. To put the matter in a phrase, Browning is the poet of human nature. He thus speaks to an age that is learning to care more for the spiritual than for the material, and to regard a man's soul as something over and beyond the product of his environment. With him the material universe is not the centre of interest but the background of the picture, the stage upon which the great human drama is played. It is the battlefield on which spiritual powers contend for mastery, and where, out of the clash of conflict, there grows the soul of man.

To an age that is weary of negations he comes with his splendid affirmations. To men chilled by the cold despair of pessimism he comes with a warm and radiant optimism. To soldiers defeated and disheartened in the fight with evil he sounds his courageous bugle blast. To waverers halting and hesitating between doubt and belief he points with a reassuring finger up to God. If he does not answer life's perplexing questions for us, he assures us that there is an answer

to be found. If he does not show us how to gain the victory, he, at least, makes us feel that it is worth while to keep on fighting. If he does not recite for us a clear-cut creed, embracing all points of theological dogma, he does reveal to us a noble vision of God in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. It is in the light that shines from His face that Browning reads and strives to interpret life's riddles. And though his poems are thronged with a multitude of men and women, striving and agonising, hoping and sinning, doubting and believing, over them all that vision shines with a clear and kindly light.

"That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,
Or decomposes but to recompose,
Become my universe that feels and knows."

The purpose of the following chapters is to indicate the line of the poet's teaching on certain of the great problems of life and thought, and to illustrate it by quotations from some of his earlier poems.

To refer to Browning as a religious teacher is to open up an inexhaustible theme. He dealt with life's greatest questions, its deepest needs, its highest aspirations. To the perplexing problems of the human heart he

brought the help and assurance of a strong and manly Christian faith. Browning was a great believer. He sympathised with the doubts and fears of weaker men, and with a strong yet gentle hand he strove to lead them to the security and serenity of his own faith. He was a great lover of souls. Because he loved God, he loved his brothers also. Because he had faith in Divine power, he had faith in men and women. It was not good men only whom he loved and trusted, but he believed in bad men and loved them too. He delighted to search out the worst characters in order to find the good in them. He even believed in men when they had ceased to believe in themselves. And the secret of Browning's faith in humanity was his belief in the saving power of Christ. He was more than a great poet, he was a great Christian.

To attempt to illustrate Browning's teaching from his works is to explore an almost illimitable field. In order to bring the task within more reasonable compass, it is necessary to impose rigorous and arbitrary limitations. We must rule out all Browning's plays, important as they are. We shall scarcely touch at all, either upon his earliest writings, *Pauline*, *Paracelsus* and *Sordello*, or

upon his later works, written after 1864, though they included his greatest poem, *The Ring and the Book*. And even then the field is so wide that, at the most, we can but glean a handful here and there as we wander at our pleasure through an enchanted land. When it has seemed necessary to do so, the stories upon which some of the poems are based are given in outline, so as to supply the key to the right apprehension of their meaning. In other cases, as in *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, an attempt has been made to follow the course of the argument and to indicate its general teaching.

The hope of the writer is that this little book may lead some to whom Browning has hitherto been only a name—and a somewhat forbidding one—to read and study his writings for themselves, and to yield to the fascination which he almost invariably exercises over the minds of those who are resolute to conquer initial difficulties, and to explore the rich and varied realms of the poet's thought.

CHAPTER II

A BISHOP AT THE DINNER-TABLE

A Study in Faith

IN order to enter into the spirit of *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, it is well, in the first place, to consider what meaning we attach to the word Faith. The term must be treated generously. It must not be confined to the narrow idea of mere intellectual assent. It has in it a greater and more fruitful suggestion than this. It has at least two sides to it: a *faithful* man is one to be trusted; a man *full of faith* is one who trusts. And trust is a practical matter, no mere affair of the intellect.

Faith, at least as Browning understood it, is a practical activity, involving in its exercise, not the mind alone, but the whole man. It is a dynamic, the motive power of life. It is both more and less than belief, for it is "the will to believe." It moulds the whole tone and temper of the life. And in thus

using the word Browning was following the Scriptural tradition.

In the New Testament, faith is regarded as the one vital condition of salvation. But the faith that saves is not a mere intellectual deduction, an appreciation of a logical process. Still less is it "believing what you know is not true." It refers to the whole attitude of the life, including all its activities. This was the view of the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, in his celebrated chapter on faith. He begins by defining faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the proving (or test) of things not seen." And then he illustrates it by the life stories of men of action. It was by the things they *did*, rather than by what they *said*, that their faith was proved.

Doubt is not incompatible with faith. But denial is faith's antithesis. When a man cried, "Lord, I believe. Help Thou my unbelief," he was not contradicting himself. Faith was his fundamental attitude, but it coexisted with abundance of doubt. If a man were to say, "I do not believe in God," it would not necessarily follow that he was an atheist. He might be a parent who had just buried his only child. He might be a lunatic, or perhaps only a dyspeptic. That is to say

that doubts may be merely emotional or temperamental. But if a man deliberately plans his life on that assumption, then he is an atheist in very deed.

Now the point of *Bishop Blougram's Apology* is not that it is a rebuke to doubt: it might even be called a defence of doubt. It is an attack on denial; it aims at cutting away the ground beneath an atheist's feet. In that sense it is a defence of the faith.

The poem takes the form of an argumentative after-dinner talk by an old worldly-wise Roman Catholic bishop (supposed to be Cardinal Wiseman) with a young sceptical writer, whose reviews and attacks on Christianity have irritated the prelate. Bishop Blougram has invited the young man—to whom is given the fanciful name of Gigadibs—to dinner, and after the meal is over the two push back their chairs for a talk over the wine cups.

It is not a very promising setting for a serious discussion of some of the greatest problems of the soul. But the arrangement is deliberately chosen by the bishop, who holds that a hungry man is a poor debater, and that one who is physically comfortable is more likely to have a sane, well-balanced

view of life. The two disputants have agreed to be quite frank with each other and to seek the truth together. As a matter of fact, however, it is the bishop who does all the talking, and we gather the arguments of the sceptic from the bishop's replies.

Blougram opens his attack by saying, "So you despise me, Mr. Gigadibs." The other protests. Blougram admits satirically that he does not mean that the sceptic despises his position with its wealth and luxury. Of course, he admires that. Indeed, he is up to the eyes in pride at being asked to dinner at a bishop's palace, and will boast about it for years to come. But he despises the bishop as a man because he does not see how Blougram can really in his heart believe in the articles of faith which he professes to hold. He thinks that, as the bishop is an educated man, he must be an unbeliever in his secret soul, though he professes belief for the sake of the worldly advantages that it brings him; as he puts it: "The thing's his trade."

Gigadibs would rather be a man of letters like Goethe, a warrior like Bonaparte, or even a mere man of fashion like Count d'Orsay, unfettered by any religious belief

or public profession, free to believe or disbelieve as he liked, than be the bishop, even if he were to be made Pope. The idea of a sceptical bishop or Pope revolts Gigadibs. It is too horrible—

“An unbelieving Pope won't do, you say.
It's like those eerie stories nurses tell,
Of how some actor on a stage played Death,
With pasteboard crown, sham orb, and tinsel'd dart
And called himself the monarch of the world ;
Then, going in the tire-room afterward
Because the play was done, to shift himself,
Got touched upon the sleeve familiarly,
The moment he had shut the closet door,
By Death himself. Thus God might touch a Pope
At unawares, ask what his baubles mean,
And whose part he presumed to play just now.
But be yourself, imperial, plain and true !”

So Gigadibs comes to the conclusion that the bishop must be a man with a mean soul. He cannot believe all that he professes, and so, content to believe as much as he can, he sets about making the best of things that come in his way. Now he, the sceptic, since he cannot see his way through all mysteries, will not accept a world so full of contradiction, will not acquiesce in a scheme of things involving so much evil.

Christians cling to their belief in a good God ruling over this mixed empire of good

and evil, but he has a dream of a better world, the world as it might be. The good things of the world come to the orthodox believer. But neither he nor the bishop can really be completely orthodox. The bishop makes his orthodoxy go as far as it will, and takes what he can get. The sceptic has done with orthodoxy altogether and scornfully refuses the advantage which any sort of faith might bring him.

The bishop answers him—

“The common problem, yours, mine, every one’s,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be,—but, finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means : a very different thing !”

He then drives his point home by using an illustration. He compares men to cabin passengers setting out for a six months’ voyage over the sea called life. To each one there is allowed a small cabin—a little room six feet square. The problem is, how to make the best provision for the voyage. One man comes with a landsman’s list of things he calls convenient—an India screen, a piano-forte, Balzac’s novels in fifty volumes, a set of Greek books, a marble bath, a large picture. But the agent, captain, or whoever

he may be, comes and says that there is no room for things like that. "Then," says the passenger, "I won't take anything." And he goes into his bare cabin without any comforts. Another man adapts himself to the conditions, and he brings neat ship-shape fixings and contrivances.

"Now," says the bishop, "the sceptic is like the man who wanted much, and got nothing. Because he cannot have the world to his mind, he refuses to make the best of it. Because there are difficulties in the way of accepting the Christian faith—the mystery of evil and so forth, he will not believe in God at all."

Gigadibs rejoins, "You practically admit that there are difficulties, that you are disturbed by doubts; why don't you throw your theology overboard as I have done mine? At any rate it would be better than pretending to believe. If you can't believe statedly, fixedly, absolutely and exclusively, why not call yourself a sceptic too?"

"Very well," says Blougram, "suppose, for the sake of argument, I do. Because there are difficulties in the way of belief, suppose I say that I do not believe at all, and so we are both sceptics; what then? Have I got

rid of my difficulties? Not at all. For, as a believer cannot shake off all doubt, so a sceptic cannot shake off all faith.

“Even an unbeliever has moments when he doubts his unbelief. He cannot always be sure that he is right. A very little thing may bring back the mood of faith again. Old beliefs will haunt him with a strange persistence. He wanders by the shore at eventide, and looks up into the sunset sky. As he gazes at the dying glory in the west, it may be that some vision falls upon his soul, and he thinks of the heaven of which he heard in his childhood’s days. He plucks a spring flower and looks into its bell, and the little flower speaks to him of the God he has denied. The news comes to him that a friend is dead, and suddenly a veil is lifted and he seems to catch a glimpse of another world. Some lines of poetry ring in his ears with a haunting message, and lo! there come back to him fifty hopes and fears that he thought were dead and done with.

“‘I doubt whether there is a God,’ he says, ‘and yet perhaps there is . . . perhaps . . . and if there be a good God, what He could do if He would, and would if He could. How He would meet men’s needs and reveal

Himself to them. And if there really be such a God, He must have done all that we need long ago. And if so, when? where? how? Perhaps it may be after all that God has revealed Himself to men through Him who was proclaimed the Way, the Truth, the Life.'

"Take an illustration. There is a rough track over a mountain side. If you look at it from the valley it seems clear and unmistakable, but when you are walking on it, you find long stretches in which the track disappears, until you wonder whether it is a road at all. Over these you must walk by faith, not by sight. The blank patches are like our hours of unbelief, when we wonder whether, after all, we have lost our way; until by and by we come out upon the road again and know that it will be well with us in the end.

"The truth is," says the bishop, "that we are both of us believers and both of us unbelievers by turn. We have our times of faith and our moments of doubt. It is just as if two men looked at a chess board. One, the believer, says, 'It is a white board, but it has got black squares upon it.' 'No,' says the unbeliever, 'it is a black board, but I admit that there are white squares.'"

"Why, then," interrupts Gigadibs, "you admit that I am as right as you are. I have as much right to drop my faith as you have to disregard your unbelief."

"No, stop a moment," Blougram replies, "not so fast. You forget our illustration about the cabin passengers. We have both of us got a life to live, and if you admit that faith and unbelief are both equally reasonable, then you must ask, which makes the best cabin furniture? In other words, which helps us to live the best life? For belief and scepticism both bear upon life.

"I say that faith is best. It is my waking life. It moulds life's activities. For me doubt is the dream-life; it has no reality. For doubt is a numbing, paralysing thing. 'What's midnight's doubt before the day-spring's faith?'

"But you, the sceptic, you regard the dream life as the reality. You try to live by negations. To be consistent you should keep your bed. Come, come," he cries, "it's best believing if we can; you can't but own that." And the sceptic seems half convinced.

Then just at this point, the argument seems to take a sudden turn. It descends to a lower level, and raises some bewildering questions in our minds. The difficulty that now

confronts us is one that has already suggested itself at several points in the poem. We have ignored it hitherto, but it can be ignored no longer. Let us face it and see what it means.

From this point onward, for a little time, we find Blougram arguing like a man of the world. He sets forth the worldly advantages of professing a Christian faith, whether or not it is whole-heartedly believed. In brief, he admits that it pays him to be a Christian. The sceptic seems to be taking the higher ground of the love of truth, of honesty of soul and purity of heart; whilst the bishop seems to be crawling amongst his fleshly delights, worldly advantages and material gains. What does it mean?

Two explanations have been offered of this seeming contradiction. One is that all the time Blougram was really a worldly minded hypocrite, and that all his professed defence of Christianity was merely part of his trade, and represented no deep-rooted conviction. That explanation may be unhesitatingly rejected. The man was sincere in the main. There is no doubt of that. There is the ring of conviction throughout much of his argument. He saw clearly what no hypocrite could ever realise—the horror and shame of

hypocrisy. How otherwise could he have used that illustration about the actor who played the part of Death and got touched familiarly on the sleeve by Death himself? No, we must dismiss the suggestion that Blougram was a deliberate hypocrite.

Another explanation has been advanced. It has been said that, in those parts of the poem in which the bishop enumerates the worldly advantages which faith brings him, he was merely talking down to the level of his companion, trying to meet him on his own ground, to fight him with his own weapons. It is suggested that he was really too high-minded to care for worldly things as he seemed to do.

This is much nearer to the truth, but it is not quite the whole truth. There are points when the bishop is trying to foil the sceptic with his own weapons. But when he does so, it seems as if he makes a mistake. Gigadibs, so far as we can trace his character, seems to be a better man than the bishop imagines. Blougram would probably have done better to appeal to his finer instincts, his love of truth and honour, his hatred of humbug and sham. The fact is that the bishop does not meet the sceptic on his own

ground here; he chooses a lower ground than his anti-Christian opponent. And further, when Blougram appeals to all the comforts and luxuries which appertain to his position as a Prince of the Church, he is more or less unconsciously revealing his heart.

The key to the problem, and to many other problems raised by the poems, is the fact that Browning was essentially a dramatist. He conceived a character—here a Roman Catholic bishop—and put himself inside that man's mind. He spoke and thought as he imagined his subject would speak and think. In this case Blougram is revealing himself with almost brutal frankness. In his eyes his auditor is a complete nonentity before whom he can say whatever he likes with disregard of consequences.

The poem, which is supposed to be one part of a dialogue, is to all intents and purposes a soliloquy. Hence it gives us Browning's conception of the innermost thoughts of a Roman Catholic prelate such as Cardinal Wiseman, a man of spiritual faith and conviction, who loved power over men, and to whom sensuous beauty and material comfort appealed strongly.

It is just this combination of sincere conviction and disingenuous sophistry, of

religious faith and sensuous materialism, that constitutes much of the interest of this character study and affords evidence of Browning's consummate genius. He so truly read human nature that he knew that most men are inconsistent. He believed that few men are so bad, but that in them might be found some nobler instincts; that few men are so good, but that they have human blemishes. He was more than a student of human nature, he was a lover of humanity. He loved the bad man for the good that was in him, and—which is sometimes even harder—he loved the good man despite his inconsistencies.

Gigadibs was a sceptic, but he had a soul that loved the truth. Blougram was a Christian believer, but he had a clinging fondness for the good things of this world. Browning was a scrupulously fair-minded man, so he did justice both to the sceptic who attacked the faith, and to the bishop who defended it. To understand this is not merely to solve many of the problems raised by Browning's poems, but also to find the key to much that is bewildering in the inconsistencies and contradictions of human nature as we meet with it in daily life. With this in our mind let us turn back to the poem.

Having agreed that "it's best believing if

we can," the bishop's next point is that if we once choose belief we must be consistent with our choice. The world has no patience with a man who follows his chosen career half-heartedly. Just as a man is allowed to choose the woman whom he wishes to marry, but, having once married her, must stand by her, and not ask to be allowed to change his mind; so when he has chosen his creed he must cleave to it with his whole heart, or else be accounted a failure.

As for Blougram his choice is the creed of the Roman Catholic Church, and, having made it, he accepts it whole-heartedly. He will not admit a single doubt or scruple. The world demands from him that there must be no shrinking or hesitancy. If he complies with that condition he gets the material rewards of his faith—wealth, honour and the world's esteem.

"Ah," cries Gigadibs in disgust, "that is a mean choice." He thinks that if Blougram had a finer soul he would not be content with it. "Well," answers the bishop, "suppose that is so. Grant I'm a beast, why beasts must lead beasts' lives. I'm making the best of the nature I've got. I admit that I like good things. Why shouldn't I take them when they come my way? Though I don't

quite agree that I'm such a beast as you suppose. We'll look at that in a minute. Meanwhile you think that, whilst the multitude may admire me, men of sense do not. You say that one wise man's verdict outweighs all the fools. You remind me that when the composer Verdi produced an inferior opéra, the poorest thing that he had ever written, all the audience went mad with applause, except one man, the great musician Rossini, the only man competent to criticise, and he sat silent amid all the tumult. So, you say, the unthinking world may admire a bishop who says that he believes in his religion, but the men of sense and education know better, and look on with cold disapproval. Is that what you think? Then I tell you that you are wrong. These critics watch and wonder most of all. For they know that I am a man of sense and learning, and that I should be a believer is marvellous to them, and excites, not their contempt, but their admiration. For an ignorant man to believe, that is nothing wonderful. For a learned man to be a sceptic, that is not uncommon. But for a highly cultured man to be a simple believer, that arouses their wondering respect."

"Ah, well," says Gigadibs, "that may all

be as you say; but I tell you one thing: I for one don't admire you."

"But, my dear sir, what *do* you admire? Tell me that. Napoleon, is it? You would admire me if I were like Napoleon? But Napoleon was a believer: a superstitious believer, even. For he believed in his good star, and apart from that belief he could never have done what he did. And unless he had some supernatural guidance, some divine warrant for it, what right had he to sacrifice so many lives? His career was one gigantic crime.

"Well, then, Shakespeare, you say. You would have me be a Shakespeare? I can't, for one thing. But try, you say. Suppose I do. As to his gifts, if I have them not by nature, will trying win them for me? As to his material gains, more than these are mine already. He lived in a superb world of his own creation. But did he therefore despise the material comforts of life? Not at all. He saved money and bought the trimmest house in Stratford town. He got what he could and imagined the rest. He couldn't be a bishop, so he created a bishopric out of his imagination. Whereas I *am* a bishop. I have got many of the things that he could

only imagine. He could only dream of the Alps: I have crossed them in ease and comfort. Ask him, if this life's all, who wins the game?

"If we still assume that we are unbelievers, you must grant that I have made the best of this world, which, according to you, is the only one that there is. I still maintain, however, that faith, belief, enthusiasm is the best thing in life, and the secret of true success. Luther succeeded because he had a living faith. I can't be a Luther because his work is done. The reformation is accomplished.

"Shall I then go a step further, and be a Strauss attacking the Christian faith with destructive criticism? Is that the type of man that you admire? What should I gain by it? Not heaven, for according to that hypothesis there is no heaven. Not that enthusiasm that kindled Luther's soul with generous warmth. Denial cannot quicken a man's pulse. Ice makes no conflagration. Not the gratitude of the world. The emancipated world enjoys itself with scarce a 'thank you.' The aggressive atheist wins neither this world nor a next, and has no quickening glow in his soul. And worst of all there is always the chance that he may be wrong."

"But still," replies Gigadibs, "you admit that you have doubts sometimes. Your cool indifference is as bad as bold unbelief. You might as well be a downright atheist as a doubting Christian.

'It's not worth having, such imperfect faith,
No more available to do faith's work
Than unbelief like mine. Whole faith, or none ! "

The bishop answers him—

"Softly, my friend ! I must dispute that point.
Once own the use of faith, I'll find you faith.
We're back on Christian ground. You call for faith:
I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.
The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,
If faith o'ercomes doubt.'

But, you ask, how do I know that my faith is stronger than my doubt and overcomes it? I answer: My life proves it. What we really believe is that on which we act. I act on my faith, not on my doubts—

'What matter though I doubt at every pore,
Head-doubts, heart-doubts, doubts at my fingers' ends,
Doubts in the trivial work of every day,
Doubts at the very bases of my soul
In the grand moments when she probes herself—
If finally I have a life to show,
The thing I did, brought out in evidence
Against the thing done to me underground
By Hell, and all its brood, for aught I know?
I say, whence sprang this? Shows it faith or doubt?

The important question is, not what exactly do you actually believe, but whither do your desires, hopes and strivings tend? Do you want to believe if you can?

‘What think ye of Christ, friend? when all’s done and said,

You like this Christianity or not?

It may be false, but will you wish it true?

Has it your vote to be so if it can? . . .

If you desire faith—then you’ve faith enough.’

But you say you cannot be content until every difficulty is removed. You must have pure faith, undiluted by a single doubt. Pure faith, indeed! You know not what you ask. Why, such clear faith would be no less than seeing God; and poor human flesh could not bear such a vision of glory; it would scorch your soul. Some people think that creation is meant to show God forth. I say it’s meant to hide Him all it can. God’s glory is blazing around us, and as He knows that we could not bear that dazzling light, He hangs a veil to screen it from our poor weak eyes—the veil we call the world. So with me, faith means perpetual unbelief kept quiet like the snake ’neath Michael’s foot, who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.”

“Ah,” says Gigadibs wistfully, “if I only

could believe as they used to do in the old days, before all these doubts arose, when men were credulous enough to believe anything; when perhaps a traveller would come and tell me that he'd seen the Ark on the top of Ararat; but he didn't climb up because it was getting dark, and he was afraid of robbers. If only I had an unquestioning faith like that!"

"Well," says the bishop, "do you know what you would do if you had? You would just do as other people did in those days. You'd lie and rob and kill and fornicate like the rest of them. That is not the kind of faith to keep you straight. That is a mere intellectual conviction that doesn't touch your heart at all. Believe me, if a man's moral life is to develop, it must be through the struggle between doubt and faith—

'No, when the fight begins within himself
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—
He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes
And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!
Never leave growing till the life to come!'

And so men grow in spiritual stature and moral strength through life-long conflict. True faith comes as the guerdon of van-

quished doubt. It is better to wrestle with great problems that confound the intellect, better even to believe in spite of reason's protests, than to adopt the supercilious attitude of those who acquit God with grace: 'He's tried—no case is proved, Philosophy is lenient—He may go.'"

"But surely," interposes Gigadibs, "faith is not always the result of conflict. There is still left in the world that old, simple, unquestioning acquiescence in religious teaching, that made it easy to believe in by-gone days."

"Even the most ignorant," Blougram replies, "do not accord to spiritual truth the same unhesitating assent that they give to physical laws. There may be an underlying doubt in a man's acceptance of the statement that God is watching him; but he has no doubt whatsoever that fire will burn or that rain will drench him. In the former case his faith has a moral quality. In the latter it has none. So I am going to go on fighting my doubts. I'm not going to give up my faith in anything: not even in the latest miracle of the Roman Church."

"But," asks Gigadibs, "why try to believe all these things? Why not cut out of your

creed the things most difficult of belief, and keep the rest?"

"Because I'd never know when to stop cutting," Blougram answers, "and, in the end, I'd be cutting out God Himself."

The sceptic replies, "There would be less danger, I think, in the cutting process, than in leaving growths of lies unpruned."

"You think so, but I think otherwise," Blougram retorts. "For one thing, if the bishops began to prune their creeds, the people would soon cast creeds off altogether; and what would become of the bishops then?"

"What a narrow, gross view of life!" Gigadibs exclaims. "All the time you are thinking of yourself and your creature comforts."

"Why shouldn't I make the best of this world now, seeing that it is the world I'm in? When I get to the next world, I'll try to make the best of that too. Why lose this life in the meantime, since its use may be to make the next life more intense?"

"Do you know," Blougram goes on, "I have often had a dream of man's spirit endlessly passing on from one world to another, and always trying to adapt its life to the conditions of the next world to come, always

shooting ahead, and never enjoying the world that it is in. Just as if a traveller, bound from North to South, says he won't wear furs in Russia because he won't need them in France. And in France discards flannel because it won't be wanted in Spain. In Spain he refuses cloth because it would be too hot for Algiers. Linen goes next, and last the skin itself—a superfluity at Timbuctoo. When, through his journey, was the fool at ease? I'm at ease now, friend!" says the sleek comfortable bishop. "And if there is a God, as I believe, I think He approves my service. If there is no God, as you suppose, what does it matter how any of us live?"

"Stop," says the sceptic, "I differ from you there. Whether there is a God or not, we ought each of us to act up to our faith or unbelief, as the case may be."

Then the bishop pounces upon him in triumph. "That is just what you dare not do," he cries. "I do try to act up to my faith; you dare not act up to your unbelief. You think that you've proved that there is no supernatural sanction for morality, that there is no such thing as a Divine law. Then what is there to hinder you from committing all the sins you fancy? If you do not believe in a

Divine law, at least you act as if you did. You have certain instincts, blind, unreasoned out, you dare not set aside, you can't tell why; but there they are, and so you let them rule. Your morality is more deeply rooted in your nature than your scepticism. I live my life here; yours you dare not live."

"But you do not do me justice," answers the sceptic. "I do not suggest living such an immoral life as you insinuate. It is true that I do not believe that there are any Divine laws to hold me back. But I do recognize human obligations. If God has no rights, man has. Knowledge and power have rights, but ignorance and weakness have rights too. When I've looked for God and failed to find Him, then I strive to regulate my life by the highest and best that I know. You look up into the sky and say you see God there. I look up, willing to see, but I only discern a cloud. You think that men are akin to angels; I don't believe that, but I do think that they are better than brutes. Why should I pretend that I think the cloud a face or regard the man as an angel? Why should I trouble myself about a quest for a God that I cannot find? Who bids me do so? Who has the right to bid me?"

"I do," strikes in the bishop, "and a greater than I. You are God's sheep. The Lord is thy Shepherd."

"Then, if I am a sheep, though I have found no shepherd, I recognize my fellow-sheep and regard their rights. In the pleasant pastures of this life I find much that I may eat without offending anybody; much that I don't want to eat, and so leave alone; and much, also, that I would like to eat, but the other sheep object, and for their sakes I refrain; though when they seem exceptionally stupid in their objections," or, in Browning's quaint phrase, 'when they seem exorbitantly sheep' "—well, I take what I want in spite of them, and let them kick and butt and bleat as they will. And so, without professing anything that I don't believe, I graze through life in this way, and like it best."

"But do you really like it best?" Blougram asks, smiling. "If so, you are more easily contented than I am. If this life is all, as you say, do you think that you have made a success of it? Your ambition seems to be simply to be a sheep with which the other sheep don't quarrel. As to me, why, the sheep themselves motion me to the best pasture. I'm an old man. You're a young man."

terms than you've ever aspired to get before. You can write an article on this interview if you like. Call it 'The Outward-bound.' It may do you some good. It can do me no harm. After this you will, I think, despise me no longer."

And at this he bade him good-night. Gigadibs went, and the bishop sat musing. "Part of what I've said to him," he thought, "is the truth. As to the rest—well, it was clever fencing. I've met him on his own ground, and even there I've worsted him." As to Gigadibs, we are told that, if he was not convinced, at any rate he ceased to write atheistic articles, and within a week emigrated to Australia and became a farmer. There, Browning hopes, he has tested his first plough and studied his last chapter of St. John, wherein he has read how the disciple who had first denied Christ afterwards confessed Him. And it may be that Gigadibs also has found the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Such is the poem—a strange patchwork of deep religious truth and cynical, worldly-wise philosophy. According to Browning's custom, he has taught us a lesson, not through the lips of an unblemished saint, but through a sleek, worldly-minded old bishop. Out of

the mouths, not of babes and sucklings, but of scribes and pharisees, he has ordained wisdom. But the result of the method is that we find chaff mixed with the grain: worldly maxims with Christian truth. The problem now is to attempt to sift the two, and to sum up briefly what we believe to be Browning's real teaching in the course of the argument.

The bishop's first point was that the sceptic is as much tormented by doubt as the believer. Scepticism does not offer us a way of escape from difficulties; it merely changes their aspect. An atheist cannot always be sure of his atheism; there are times when he realizes that he may be wrong in his denials, and that there may be a God after all.

Next, he teaches that faith and unbelief should be tested by their effect upon life. This is a foreshadowing of pragmatism. Scepticism is a failure—it doesn't work. Faith is a living power that helps and strengthens men. Unbelief is a cold, dead thing that paralyses life's activities.

Then, if faith is better than unbelief, it is best to have whole-hearted faith. If we decide to believe in God, we must believe in Him with all our might. Doubts will come, but they must be fought against until they are

conquered. The life of faith must be held to be the waking life of the soul. Doubts and questionings must be regarded as the unrealities of the midnight hour, the dreams of a disordered imagination. But if faith is the all-important thing, why is it not made easier? Why does not God give to us proofs of His own existence that we cannot disregard? Browning answers that that would not be faith at all. It would be an intellectual process, not a moral education. It would not help us to be better men. It is when we have to battle with doubts that we grow in soul. We ought not to give up religion because we find it hard to believe; the very stress of conflict is God's instrument for perfecting our lives.

Finally, he teaches us that religion is something deeply embedded in human nature, interwoven into the very texture of our life. Beneath the faith of Blougram there lies the need for God, for the living God: no philosophic abstraction, but a God who can touch him with a touch that the man can feel and to which he can respond. And beneath the scepticism of Gigadibs there are deep-rooted instincts that cannot be argued away by his unbelief, that refuse to surrender their sovereignty over his nature at the demand

of his sceptical intellect, that maintain their supremacy amidst all the conflicts of his soul.

Such, in outline, is the meaning of *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, and such seems to be Browning's teaching on the subject of Faith.

CHAPTER III

A GRAMMARIAN, A MUSICIAN, AND A RABBI

A Discussion of the Value and Meaning of Life

To a superficial observer it may seem that a discussion of the value and meaning of Life ought to have precedence over a study in Faith, as, in the natural order, Life must come before Faith. In tracing the teaching of Browning, however, it seems better to treat of Faith first, as the most fundamental factor in his scheme of thought, as one that colours or determines all the rest. For a sceptic, life has one kind of significance; for a Christian believer it has quite another. Indeed, so far from coming at the beginning of a study of Browning's teaching, it is open to question whether this theme ought not properly to be left until the very end. For it is not until we have determined our attitude towards many other problems that we are able to decide upon any answer to that eternal riddle of the Sphinx

—What is the meaning of Life? Nevertheless, it seems best at this point to seek at least a tentative answer to the question, even if the results we obtain have to be modified in the light of later study.

There are open to us two possible lines of investigation in relation to Browning's teaching on this subject.

We might begin by sketching in outline what we consider to be Browning's theory, and then illustrate it by quotations from his works, or alternatively we might take those poems which seem to have a definite bearing on the matter in hand, and from an analysis of them deduce a theory. The latter course seems the more reasonable and less likely to result in reading our own theories into the poet's work, and yet it presents an almost insuperable difficulty. For the question at once arises as to which of Browning's poems contain his exposition of the Meaning of Life? To that question we can best answer that nearly all of the more considerable of them contain some reference to this great problem.

We may, however, rid ourselves to a great degree of the embarrassment by selecting two or three of the shorter poems which deal with the theme, not incidentally but more directly,

trying to glean their teaching, and then illustrating or amplifying the result by brief quotations from other parts of the poet's work.

Still confining ourselves to his earlier writings, we select for exposition three poems in which his teaching on Life seems most clearly set forth. They are entitled *A Grammarian's Funeral*, *Abt Vogler*, and *Rabbi ben Ezra*. They discuss Life from the standpoint of a grammarian, a musician, and a Jewish Rabbi.

The first-named poem carries us back to the time of the revival of learning, an age of intellectual curiosity, of an insatiable thirst for knowledge. The scene is probably laid in Germany, though on that point there is no direct evidence. We have before us a picture of a funeral procession. It is night-time, almost daybreak. A coffin is being borne on the shoulders of a little band of students. They are making their way up a steep and winding mountain-path. Beneath them lies the plain with its quiet villages wrapped in deep sleep. Above them, against the sky-line, we see dimly in the darkness the rugged outline of the mountain-top; and on the summit are the walls and ramparts of a city. They are going to bury their Master on the top of the mountain. Common men may be buried

in common places; this man was worthy of a lofty tomb. He must be laid in a spot where the first light of morning breaks and the last rays of evening linger.

“Our low life was the level’s and the night’s;
He’s for the morning.”

As the men pass upward they make the way musical with song. They are rejoicing over their Master as they bear him in triumph. To mourn and bewail him would be to dishonour his memory. They celebrate his virtues and proclaim his victory. And from their song we learn who this man was, that was deemed worthy of so high and so honourable a tomb. We think of a modern example of burial on a hill-top as we recall an empire-builder who sleeps amid the Matopo Hills in South Africa. But this man had done nothing to expand an empire. We remember that honourable burial is given to great warriors, to statesmen, and to those poets whose songs have enriched the world’s music. But this man had achieved no triumph on the battle-field or in the senate-house, nor had his words rung out in music to catch the ear of an attentive world. He was only a grammarian, a man who had spent his life in brooding over

parts of speech, and puzzling out the uses and meanings of words. When he was a young man he was a student. Middle age came and found him a student still.

"Come," his friends cried, "it's time you began to do something. Life is slipping by."

"I'm learning how to live," he answered, and turned back to his study. Old age crept upon him and found him still poring over his books, a learned man already, but bent on learning still. Surely it was time to taste life's pleasures now?

"No," he answered, "I mean to live a full, rich life. I have great plans and purposes. I must learn more yet before I am fit for life."

"But," his friends expostulated, "you're an old man now. When are you going to live this great life of yours?"

"In Eternity," answered the grammarian, and went back to his books a dying man.

"Before living he'd learn how to live,—

No end to learning :

Earn the means first—God surely will contrive

Use for our earning.

Others mistrust and say, 'But time escapes :

Live now or never !'

He said, 'What's time? Leave Now for dogs
and apes !

Man has Forever.'"

What does it mean? It is a parable meant to teach the value and meaning of life. The grammarian is Browning's answer to the gross materialist, the man who lives for this world alone and ignores the great future. It seems, perhaps, an exaggeration to suggest that a man might profitably devote all his years and energies to the study of the parts of speech, to the acquirement of knowledge that he cannot use in this life. It is at least an exaggeration of a great truth. It means that life is a school-time, a preparation for the greater life beyond. We are here to master the elements of living, not to exhaust its possibilities. We must cherish ambitions so vast that in this world they can never all be fulfilled. God will find a use for our powers and give us scope and opportunity for our great plans and purposes. This was the grammarian's belief,—that the grave was the threshold, not the terminus of life.

“Was it not great? did not he throw on God,
 (He loves the burthen)—
God's task to make the heavenly period
 Perfect the earthen?
Did he not magnify the mind, show clear
 Just what it all meant?
He would not discount life, as fools do here,
 Paid by instalment.

He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success
Found, or earth's failure :

'Wilt thou trust death or not?' He answered 'Yes :
Hence with life's pale lure !'

That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it :

This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.

That low man goes on adding one to one,
His hundred's soon hit :

This high man, aiming at a million,
Misses an unit.

That, has the world here—should he need the next,
Let the world mind him !

This, throws himself on God, and unperplexed
Seeking shall find Him.

Does not this also suggest an answer to a constantly recurring question as we face the mysteries of life and death—the problem of what we call an untimely death? Oftentimes we meet with cases such as this: a young life full of promise suddenly cut off: rich powers on the point of reaching their full fruition suddenly blasted by death: a long training, preparation and equipment for service rendered null and void by the falling of the last shadow. It seems to us as if Providence had made a mistake.

"No," cried the grammarian, "there is no mistake. The school-time was soon over, that was all. The promise shall not be unfulfilled, the great powers shall yet reach their full

fruition, the preparation shall not be wasted; man has Forever."

In the poem the seeming tragedy is emphasized in order to enhance the triumph. The period of preparation was extended through the whole of a long lifetime. The grammarian was not a young man cut off before his prime. He was an old man who even then had not commenced to live. He had been training himself for service all his life, and if this life were all his toil ended in colossal failure. He had staked everything upon the future. He had cast himself upon God. And because his life was great, not in its achievements, but in its ambitions; not in its attainments, but in its hopes and purposes; his students bore him aloft and buried him upon a mountain-top.

"This man decided not to Live but Know—

Bury this man there?

Here—here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds
form,

Lightnings are loosened,

Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!

Lofty designs must close in like effects:

Loftily lying,

Leave him—still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying."

We now pass to one of the most perfect and

beautiful poems that Browning ever wrote, the lyric entitled *Abt Vogler*. We turn from the grammarian of the Renaissance to a musician of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Abbé Vogler was born in 1749 and died in 1814. He was a musician, a composer, and a musical inventor who helped to perfect the pipe organ. He was also a clergyman and a court chaplain. In the poem he is depicted as sitting before his instrument, letting his fingers wander over the keys, and extemporizing. As he was musing there grew before him a wonderful conception which he expressed in music. It seemed like some wondrous palace of sound.

A fable relates that Solomon built a palace for the Queen of Sheba by pronouncing the ineffable name of God, and thereby summoning all the good and evil spirits from heaven and hell, compelling them to do his work and to build his great house. So it seemed to the musician that he had summoned to his aid all the spirits of sound, and they had wrought harmoniously to erect this superb structure for him. The deep notes went plunging down into the abyss and laid the foundations deep upon the very fires of hell. The high notes went soaring upwards, raising walls and

pinnacles as of gleaming gold up towards the very heavens. It called up a vision of the dome of St. Peter's on a festival night when the lamps are kindled one after another, higher and higher, until the whole is outlined in one blaze of illumination.

Vogler seemed to see his palace of sound kindled into a flood of glory as it towered up to heaven. And then it seemed as if God were answering his effort. As he reached up toward heaven, heaven stooped down in a Shekinah-cloud of glory and met his aspiring soul. The music was no longer his alone, but his and God's. Then a fresh wonder met him. Mystic presences manifested themselves in his palace of sound. The men of the future, the unborn of coming ages, walked there, lured to earth before their time by the glory of his temple. The men of the past, the long dead, were there, called back to the old world once more. And when the past and future met, the man of the present, the musician himself, felt that he was made perfect too. And to him it was all miraculous—the eternal miracle of music! The process of painting he could understand, the rules of verse he knew; that was artistry, but this was Divine—a special, a unique gift of God.

“And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to
man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound,
but a star.
Consider it well : each tone of our scale in itself is nought ;
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all
is said :
Give it to me to use ! I mix it with two in my thought :
And, there ! Ye have heard and seen : consider and
bow the head !”

At last the music ceased, the vision passed, the palace of sound died away. It was gone, and he could never reproduce it more. The tears started to his eyes at the thought of what he had lost. It was vain to suggest to him that other music might come, other inspirations visit him. It was the same music he sought, the same vision, the same inspiration. Then in answer to his cry there came the Divine assurance that what was, shall be. God changes not, and all good things are in His keeping.

There shall never be one lost good ! What was, shall live as before ; in this life we have imperfect glimpses of the good ; in the next we shall have the clear vision. “On the earth the broken arcs ; in the heaven, a perfect round.” And so it shall be, he thinks, with all life’s music. Whatever there is Divine and beautiful in life cannot perish. A man’s pure love

for a woman, a poet's dream of splendour, these are earthly voices singing to God, and He has treasured the music. We shall hear it all again in heaven.

"All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist ;
Not its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, nor good,
nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
melodist
When Eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth
too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the
sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
Enough that He heard it once : we shall hear it by-
and-by."

Then he rises to an even higher faith. Not only shall the triumphs of life abide, but even its failures are pledges of triumphs to come. Not only shall the music of life continue, but even its silences shall be filled with song. The musician has learned a great secret. Though he cannot put it into words, he has come to understand the mystery of pain. God has taught him the meaning of evil in the world. Other people may argue about it and attempt to explain it in their own way. He cannot argue, he is not able to explain, but in his heart he knows.

“And what is our failure here but a triumph’s evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or
agonized?

Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing
might issue thence?

Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should
be prized?

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal
and woe:

But God has a few of us whom He whispers in the
ear;

The rest may reason and welcome: ’tis we musicians
know.”

In the last stanza he comes back to life’s commonplace. After soaring in heavenly places he finds himself treading once more the prosaic paths of earth. The celestial music has died away, and a great silence falls like a shadow upon his soul. What is now his attitude towards the earthly life? He says, “I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.” He will accept the limitations and humiliations of earth, but he will not be satisfied with them. He will work within them, but he will look beyond them. He has his feet on the earth, but his eyes are on the stars, and in this spirit of patient, proud and sober acquiescence he finds the common chord again, the C Major of this life.

In *Rabbi ben Ezra* we have the musing of

an old Jewish teacher on youth and age, on life and death, on past, present and future, on our changing experiences and shifting circumstances, on our aspirations and hopes, on our failures and triumphs, and on the meaning of it all when viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*.

From the beginning the poem strikes the note of cheery optimism—

“Grow old along with me !
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made :
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, ‘A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half ; trust God : see all nor be
afraid !’”

He recalls the days of youth, when he rejoiced in the good and beautiful things of earth and was nevertheless unsatisfied with them. They seemed to hold out to him a glowing promise ever unfulfilled. They hinted to him a perfection suggested by earthly beauty, but not realized on earth. He “received not the promise,” and was ever looking for “some better thing.” For these aspirations and hopes, these airy ideals, these long, long thoughts of youth, he thanks God. They are to him proofs that we are not meant to be satisfied with earth. Beasts are not

tormented with spiritual longings. It is God striving within us that disturbs us and makes us look, and long, and wonder. Then let us ever rejoice in these stings and rebuffs, those pains and strains that prove our Divine birth, and are a pledge of a greater life to come.

The God that made us will not leave us imperfect. We are growing towards perfection, and these aches and pangs are our growing pains. The test of man's greatness lies not in his origin, but in his destiny. He may have sprung from the brutes, but he is going to God. His life is developing, and the later stages answer the questions of the earlier. Age is richer than youth, and solves many of its problems. But age in its turn has its difficulties, its unanswered questions, its unfulfilled hopes. What then? Death, and the future beyond death, shall explain its mysteries, as it has answered the questions of youth. It is the business of youth to strive, to attempt to make something of life. It is the concern of age to contemplate, to consider, to try to understand life's lessons.

But here is the problem. By what standard are we to judge, by what measure are we to estimate the value and meaning of life?

Men's opinions differ as to what constitutes success in life. What is God's verdict? The world judges a man by his work, by "things done, that took the eye and had the price." But there is much in a man's life that the world cannot estimate: certain hopes and longings, never outwardly fulfilled, purposes that never reached accomplishment, thoughts that could never be expressed in word or deed. All these things are nothing to the world, but they are part of the man, they enter into his life. God counts them all.

"But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the
man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and
escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the
pitcher shaped."

From that metaphor of a potter's wheel he draws new hope and comfort. Men say, "Since life fleets, all is change; the Past gone,

seize to-day!" "Fools," the Rabbi answers scornfully, "the past is not dead. It has touched you and moulded your life as the potter touches the clay in its whirling flight on the wheel. It has left its indelible impress on your character. Earth changes, but God abides and we abide, and the influence of the past lives on in us. That is what life means, that is the explanation of the things pleasant and painful that happen to us; they are the touch of the Potter's hand, the impress of His fingers moulding and shaping us. And to what end is all this leading? What is God doing with us? Into what is He making us? This, and no less than this—we are being fashioned into cups meet for the Master's use.

It is the old catechism answer again: "The chief end of man is to glorify God." An old minister used sometimes to pray after this fashion: "Lord, we are the clay and Thou our Potter. We are content to be the clay, if Thou art the Potter. Mould and fashion us as Thou wilt. But oh! grant that we may *feel* the manipulation of Thy fingers." Rabbi ben Ezra had reached this assurance. He felt the manipulation of God's fingers, and that was assurance enough.

“ So, take and use Thy work :
Amend what flaws may lurk,
What strain o' the stuff, what warpings past the
aim !
My times be in Thy hand !
Perfect the cup as planned !
Let age approve of youth, and Death complete
the same ! ”

What, then, is the sum and substance of Browning's teaching on Life so far as we have gleaned it? We have seen that he regards life as an education, a preparation, a part of a larger whole. No good thing in life is ever really lost. All exalted thoughts, all sublime dreams and hopes, come to us from God, and at best they are but fragments and glimpses of the perfect whole which shall some time be revealed. The sorrow and pain of life, its disappointed hopes and thwarted purposes, arise from the fact that we are greater than our environment. We were not made to be satisfied with earth. We have a grander destiny. Our very failures here are pledges of triumph to come. In a poem entitled *Old Pictures in Florence* Browning expresses the same truth. He has been contrasting the perfection of Greek statuary with the present imperfection of the human form, and he suggests the question—

“ . . . What if we so small
Be greater and grander the while than they?
Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?
In both, of such lower types are we
Precisely because of our wider nature;
For time, theirs—ours, for eternity.

To-day's brief passion limits their range;
It seethes with the morrow for us and more.
They are perfect—how else? they shall never change
We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.
The Artificer's hand is not arrested
With us; we are rough hewn, nowise polished:
They stand for our copy, and, once invested
With all they can teach, we shall see them
abolished.”

Life, then, is imperfect because it is incomplete. Our circumstances chafe us because we are growing out of our limitations, and yet it is mainly within those limitations that we have to live. To be contented with them is spiritual suicide, is bartering our birthright, and yet we have to submit to them. And by means of these very limitations, or rather by means of our conflict with them, God is shaping us for higher service. What, then, is our immediate duty? It is to serve and love God by serving and loving our fellow-men. It is expressed in the poem *Paracelsus*, where he pictures this love as wise

"To see a good in evil, and a hope
In ill success ; to sympathize, be proud
Of (men's) half-reasons, faint aspirings, dim
Struggles for truth, their poorest fallacies,
Their prejudice and fears and cares and doubts."

Love expressing itself in sympathy and service, seeing the good in evil men, hoping on through failure, strengthening the weak in their struggles, entering with understanding into the lives of others, working within human limitations, whilst aspiring after Divine perfection—this is the secret of true success, and the master key that unlocks life's mysteries and reveals its ultimate value and meaning.

CHAPTER IV

"A LIGHT THAT FAILED"

A Story of Unhallowed Love

IN order to understand Browning's teaching aright it is of the highest importance that we should study his delineations of the passion of human love and its effects on life. He has depicted it in a variety of ways: sometimes in the brief passionate outbursts of a lover's devotion, sometimes in dramatic form, and sometimes incidentally as one of the forces moulding life and character. His own life, hallowed by one transfiguring romance, had been preserved in unsullied purity, unscorched by those base fires that are sometimes dignified by the name of love. Yet despite this immunity, or perhaps rather because of it, he saw clearly how that passion wrought in the lives of others, and he depicted unsparingly the ruin and havoc that followed in its wake. Nowhere, perhaps, has he done so with more subtle insight or with more delicate touch than

in that poem which deals with the tragic failure of Andrea del Sarto. Before studying Browning's interpretation of the story, it is well to recall in outline the incidents of the painter's career.

At the end of the fifteenth century there lived in Italy three painters. Two of them were, perhaps, the greatest masters that the world has ever known. The third might have been greater than either of the other two, and yet failed to reach their level. The first two were Michael Angelo and Rafael. The third was Andrea del Sarto. And the reason for his failure is the story of his love.

Andrea was the son of a tailor in Florence, and himself became a goldsmith. He studied art under the greatest teachers of the day, and soon won a reputation as a great painter. His fame spread far and wide. So careful and accurate was he that he was called "the faultless painter." Then came the tragedy of his life. He fell in love with a woman who had a face of divine loveliness, and a heart cold, cruel, and sensual. Her name was Lucrezia, and she was the wife of one Carlo di Domenico. Andrea waited until her husband died, and then married her and became her slave for life. She does not seem to have

cared much about him, but regarded his genius as a means of making money to keep her in comfort and to enable her to pay the gambling debts of other lovers, who were far more to her than her husband.

Soon after his marriage Andrea received an invitation from the French King, Francis, to come to Fontainebleau, to paint some pictures for him. It was the painter's great opportunity, and he accepted the invitation. Lucrezia stayed behind with her lovers in Italy. In a year's time, however, she sent a message to Andrea bidding him come back, and in obedience to her summons he threw up his engagement and returned. The French King had such confidence in him that he entrusted to Andrea a large sum of money, in order that he might purchase works of art in Italy and forward them to the French court. Andrea took the money and, instigated by his wife, misappropriated it, using it to build a house for themselves at Fiesole. Thenceforth he lived a life of misery and degradation, painting pictures and selling them to gratify his wife's extravagant whims. His father and mother were in poverty, but he let them die uncared for and neglected. When his talent faded, the wife for whom he had bartered his

soul deserted him. At last, in 1530, at the age of forty-two, he died of the plague, forgotten by his friends, and neglected by his wife.

What, then, was the effect of this mis-directed love upon his life and work?

Consider it a moment. It needs two gifts to make an artist—a gift of soul and a gift of hand: a power of vision and a skill in execution. In Michael Angelo and in Rafael, great craftsmen as they were, the former was always greater than the latter. They could always see with the eyes of the soul visions far more beautiful than they could ever transfer to canvas by the craft of the hand. Andrea was a consummate craftsman. He excelled both his competitors in the skill and accuracy of his painting. Every vision that hovered before the eye of his mind he could portray in lifelike colours for the world to see. He might have been the greatest of the three. But his base passion for Lucrezia darkened the eye of his soul. The skill remained, but the visions came not.

It was the story of Samson and Delilah over again. The man of great powers fell into the snare of an evil woman, and she delivered him over to the powers of darkness that blind men to the Light of God. The one

thing, however, that Andrea could still paint superbly was the portrait of Lucrezia's face. Again and again in his pictures that face looks out upon us. One other face also he has depicted with matchless fidelity, and that is his own. In the National Gallery there is a picture of a man with the pathos of an infinite sorrow in his eyes. It is the portrait of Andrea del Sarto painted by himself. The faultless painter had become a wasted genius, wasted by the degradation of an unhallowed love. This is the story that Browning has commemorated in his poem, the story of a light that failed.

It is evening, and Andrea and Lucrezia are standing together at the window of their house overlooking Fiesole. They have been quarrelling over some demand that Lucrezia has been making for more money to pay the gambling debts of some lover-cousin of hers. She has insisted upon Andrea's painting more pictures to satisfy the creditor. He has given in, and now wants to end the dispute.

"But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia ; bear with me for once :
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart ?
I'll work then, for your friend's friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,

Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
Oh, I'll content him,—but to-morrow, Love!"

So he prostitutes his genius, and makes his brush the obedient slave of a taskmaster's will, instead of the instrument for the expression of his own soul. All for what? Not for Lucrezia's love, but as the price of her toleration. Though even yet he hopes against hope for some show of affection, some little tenderness. But for the present his work must wait. This evening he is weary—wearied in heart, wearied with constant contentions, wearied with the weariness of a man who is conscious that he has failed. He pleads to be allowed to sit by her quietly, to hold her hand and to gaze upon her beauty. His eyes dwell hungrily upon her face, her form, her manifold physical charm. It was for this that he had sold himself. No heart, no warmth, no love had he received as the price of his bargain—nothing but a beautiful, brainless, soulless woman.

Lucrezia was one of those strange monsters, a woman who was cold and calculating, and yet lustful. She did not sin through the warmth of eager passion, but, with a heart as cold and as hard as ice, she deliberately culled

for herself the flowers and fruits of the forbidden tree. For a man with the soul of an artist to link himself for life to a woman like that was to commit spiritual suicide. And yet this woman with an arctic heart seems to have been able to arouse fiery passions in the breasts of others. He pictures the admiration she calls forth.

“My face, my moon, my everybody’s moon,
Which everybody looks on and calls his,
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks—no one’s : very dear, no less.”

As she listens to his adoration she smiles, and when he catches that fleeting expression upon her face there flashes upon him the conception of a picture which should be at once a representation of their present interview and an allegory of his life and work.¹ As Andrea looks from the smile on his wife’s face to the landscape outside he sees in the greyness of the evening an emblem of his own shadowed life.

“A common greyness silvers everything,—
All in a twilight, you and I alike
—You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That’s gone you know),—but I, at every point ;

¹ The picture, whose genesis Browning thus describes, is one that hangs in the Pitti Palace.

My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole——

—— days decrease,

And autumn grows, autumn in everything.

Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape

As if I saw alike my work and self

And all that I was born to be and do,

A twilight piece."

Then, as he realizes his bondage to the flesh, he tries for a moment to excuse himself, and to shift the blame elsewhere. He attempts, as weak men so often do, to lay the responsibility for his failure upon God.

"... Love, we are in God's hand.

How strange now, looks the life He makes us lead ;

So free we seem, so fettered fast we are !

I feel he laid the fetter : let it lie !"

He accepts his failure with a faithless and hopeless acquiescence, and regards it as the decree of an inexorable fate. His philosophy is that enervating form of determinism that unfits a man for conflict by telling him that his defeat is assured beforehand. And that, in Browning's eyes, is the unpardonable sin. A man may fail again and again, and still there may be hope for him; but let him acquiesce in failure, and for him the light of hope is extinguished in the darkness of despair.

Then Andrea begins to talk to his shallow, unheeding wife about his art, painfully conscious all the while that she has neither the interest to listen, nor the sympathy to comprehend. Nevertheless he tries to arouse in her some thrill of that pride in him that had died away long ago. He compares his gifts with those of other artists. He claims truly that it is easy for him to do that which for many others is not only difficult, but impossible. He has a skill in craftsmanship of which others vainly dream. But the terrible fact remains that he has lost the greatest gift of all. They have that which he has forfeited : an artist's soul. They can rise on the wings of faith to heavenly places, and see visions that are hidden from him. His wings are clipped. His spirit is in prison. Their works have earthly defects, but their souls have heavenly visions. His work has the mark of an almost Divine perfection, but his soul is shut out from the presence of God.

" There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I
know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,

Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here."

Then he touches upon another symptom which indicates the numbness of his soul : his indifference to praise or blame. The great artists are painfully sensitive. A word of approval or disapproval sets their blood boiling. They feel that their works are open to criticism, because they see them in the light of an ideal that shines above and beyond them. Their paintings indicate more than they can express. So when a critic sees beyond the mere expression and understands and interprets them, the artist thrills with joy and gratitude. But when some blundering realist blurts out his matter-of-fact criticism concerning faulty drawing and imperfect expression, there rises in the painter's soul the quick anger of outraged parental love defending the offspring of its genius.

Andrea knows nothing of these thrills of passion. Criticism cannot touch him. He knows what he can do, and he does it perfectly. His perfection arises from his limitation. He is the low man who keeps on adding one to one : "his hundred's soon hit." The great masters are the high men "aiming at a

million" and sometimes missing an unit. There is an imperfection which is bright with hope and rich in promise. The fact that a man's reach exceeds his grasp is a pledge and assurance of heaven. God has given no powers for which He will not somewhere and at some time find scope.

But silver-grey, placid perfection is the end of everything; it means the exhaustion of art. And Andrea feels that he has reached the limits of the life of his soul. Had his gift of craftsmanship been linked to a vision and aspiration that exceeded it as far as Rafael's ideals excelled his achievements he might have been the world's greatest painter. He looks at a copy of one of Rafael's paintings and sees a flaw in it—an arm out of drawing that he could correct with a touch—but despite the imperfect execution he recognizes in the picture a quality, a soul, a power of insight which is for ever beyond him. "Then why is it?" he asks. Once more he tries to shift the blame, this time not on God, but on the woman. "You," he cries, "you are the cause of my failure. You, with your beautiful face and your sordid soul. Oh, why did you not help me, inspire me, uplift me, instead of dragging me down?" But he immediately

repents of his upbraiding, as his heart convicts him of his own sin.

"Incentives," he says, "come from the soul's own self; the rest avail not." Then, as he contemplates his own defective vision and his rivals' imperfect execution, it seems to him that God has so divided the gifts that absolute perfection is impossible on earth. He draws comfort from the thought that as he is underrated, poor and despised in this world, God may take his sufferings into account in dispensing rewards and punishments hereafter.

For, in truth, he is in hell already. He meets sometimes courtiers from the court of King Francis, and they freeze him with their disdain, or, even worse, they scorch him with burning words of contempt. And the bitterness of their scorn is intensified by the remembrance of those golden days when they crowded round him in admiring throngs while he painted for King Francis, a man honoured and famous. Then, if ever, his soul had its opportunity. Then he saw glimpses of that ideal world that ever shone before the eyes of Rafael. He had a dream of a day when, having achieved greatness, he might lay his triumph as a tribute at the feet of Lucrezia.

Those were his kingly days. But alas! they ended too soon. His temptress grew restless and called him back, and he turned from the opening gates of heaven, lured to the earth by the siren's voice. He resolves to tell her what he has lost for her sake. He repeats to her words that he has cherished in secret in his heart for long years: a certain prophecy which Michael Angelo has made to Rafael, that he, Andrea, has gifts which, under favourable circumstances, might enable him to snatch the laurel from that great painter's brow.

But so little interest has she in her husband's career that she shows by a careless question that she has forgotten Angelo and his words of praise almost before Andrea has finished telling her the story. It means nothing to her; and the iron enters into Andrea's soul as he realizes once more how utterly indifferent she is to his art. Not without a touch of bitterness he tries to explain in terms she can understand what success would mean. "I should work better; do you comprehend? I mean that I should earn more, give you more." But as he gazes at that golden land of promise he sees between it and him, black and hideous, the impassable

barrier of his sin. A vision of judgment shines before him. He says to Lucrezia—

“Come from the window, love,—come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.
King Francis may forgive me : oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with !
Let us but love each other.”

The house in which he lives is the monument of his sin. As he looks up at the walls, judgment is blazoned upon them. The mortar seems to change to stolen gold, which flares and blazes like the very fires of hell. As upon the walls of Belshazzar's palace, so upon Andrea's house, a hand had written : “Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.” Andrea caught a glimpse of the vengeful writing, shuddered and turned to Lucrezia, at once his sin and his reward, saying, “Let us but love each other.”

And for answer there came the sound of a whistle outside the window. Lucrezia's lover had come, and she rose to go at his call. Andrea had sinned for this woman, and even the pleasure of his sin was denied to him. And yet, betrayed by the woman for whom he had

betrayed his trust, he still stood by his choice. "I regret little," he says. "I would change still less." Even of the wrong to King Francis he does not repent. For his brutality to his parents he is ready to excuse himself. His wife has given him very little as compensation for the murder of his soul, but that little suffices him in this world. He hopes for new chances in heaven, and ends by saying, "There's still Lucrezia—as I choose."

That is Browning's picture of the lowest kind of love, the unhallowed passion that scorches and blasts and blights a man's soul, and leaves his life seared and barren. A passion fed by the flames of hell.

CHAPTER V

A MAGIC SPELL AND AN INARTICULATE POET

A Study of Human Love at its Best

BROWNING is not generally regarded as a writer of love-poems as that term is commonly understood. By love-poetry in this sense is meant the rapturous and ecstatic expression of a man's admiration for some woman: the enumeration of her charms glowing with the thrill of physical attraction, the magic and mystery of that union of spirits which is partly, at least, based upon and associated with the needs and instincts of the bodily nature. Yet even when the term is understood in this limited sense the writings of Browning are by no means wholly lacking in the element of love-poetry.

Here and there in his earlier poems, and again in the series last published (though not in all cases the last written), we find a poem marked by all the passion and thrill and rapture of the true love-song. But if we regard

love as meaning not merely the passion of a man for a maid, but include in the term the devotion of husband and wife, of friend and friend, of parent and child, then Browning was pre-eminently a high priest in the temple of love. Again and again he made it his theme. He traced its course and depicted its failure and defeats, its joys and its victory. He knew well how vast and important a factor it is in human affairs, and how potent an instrument in forming character. There is no theme on which he was better qualified to speak, for there is no subject on which he had a more intimate and exalted personal experience. As a youth he had guarded his heart in inviolate purity. The freshness of his passions had not been squandered in degrading associations. So when at length he met the woman who was his soul's mate, he could offer her the full, fresh, passionate devotion of a pure man's love.

In all the story of English literature there has been no more lofty and beautiful record of the power of love than in the romance of the courtship and marriage of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. Yet the personal element is by no means prominent in his love-poems. His own experience gave colour and

tone to all that he wrote on the great subject, but he and his wife remain in the background; we feel the influence of their presence, but rarely do we see their forms. The happiness of his married life was too sacred a thing to be made the subject of songs that all the world would read. It was not his way to "unlock his heart with a sonnet-key." He did, however, break through this delicate reserve now and again. He gave the public "a peep through his window, though he forbade foot over his threshold."

The epilogue to *Men and Women*, entitled "One Word More," is avowedly dedicated to his wife, and in it he speaks definitely of his love for her. In the poem called *By the Fireside* he does draw the veil of a thin disguise over his reference to his own experience, but so transparent is it that we do not hesitate for a moment in identifying the figure of the woman with "that great brow and the spirit-small hand propping it."

Nor does the substitution of a gorge in the Apennines for a house in Wimpole Street make the love-scene of the poem any less certainly a record of the experiences of the poet. We might even venture to call *By the Fireside* the love-story of Robert Browning

as told by himself. Let us consider it in that light.

We gather that the speaker in the poem is a man of middle age, or rather more. At any rate he is well past early manhood, and old age is for him nigh at hand. He is meditating and planning what he will do when the long, dark autumn evenings of life's November come. He imagines himself sitting by the fireside, whilst the wind is flapping the shutters outside, and the children are playing beside the hearth. An open book is on his knee, a great wise book of Greek prose—Plato, perhaps—for the poetic days of youth are gone. He is turning the leaves and pretending to read, but he is in reminiscent mood, and his attention wanders from the page. With his mind in this vagrant condition one thing suggests another, until there is a whole network of ideas interlacing each other like the boughs of trees, and he seems to be looking down a long avenue of thoughts to the distant vista at the end. Then his mind escapes from the interwoven association of ideas that sprang from some suggestions on the printed page, and indulges freely in recalling old memories—memories of youth and of Italy.

Italy ! His heart leaps up in answer to the name. There is a music in it to which he can never fail to respond. Did ever a man love the country of his adoption more than Browning loved Italy ?

“Oh woman-country, wooed not wed,
Loved all the more by earth's male-lands,
Laid to their hearts instead !”

Then the picture that rises before his mind becomes more definite. It is not only Italy that he sees, but one little spot in that beautiful country. The description that follows has been identified with a walk that Mr. and Mrs. Browning took towards the Prato Fiorito when they were staying at the Baths of Lucca, not far from their house in Florence.

The scenery is depicted in a series of exquisite cameos, until we can imagine ourselves tracing the path, step by step, with the poet. He sees, and he makes us to see, the embowering wood, the ravine, at the bottom of which a tiny thread of water slips and springs from slab to slab, the little lake in the distance with the white roofs of Pella reflected on its margin. Away yonder the sharp peaks of snow-clad Alps like silver spear-heads charge the heavens. The path we are treading clings to the side of a precipitous rock.

The very stones that lie about us are made beautiful by fretting lichens and green fronds of fern. Yellow flowers grow by the foot-path, and chestnut-burrs fall in showers at our feet. The golden leaves of the creeping plant flecked with a splash of blood-red colour, the rich green of the soft moss, the rose-flush mushrooms and the fawn-coloured flaky toadstool all enter into the composition of the picture—a perfect piece of Nature-painting, with rich detail in the foreground and a suggestion of sublimity and far distance in the background. Then the path takes a turn and winds round the ridge, and reveals a little deserted chapel on the far side of the ravine, reached by a one-arched bridge, and below the bridge the midges are dancing over a pool of water. Every detail is vividly depicted—the damp, dripping, dark grey stone of the chapel and bridge, the hemp-stalks steeping in the water, the lichens and the ivy—all are photographed with realistic fidelity.

The little chapel is all but disused. It may be that on some saint's day a priest may gather a congregation of some dozen humble folks—charcoal-burners, hemp-dressers, woodmen and fowlers. Yet the small place is not without an attempt at ornament. Over the

porch, protected by a projecting pent-house, is a fresco probably representing *John in the Desert*, but now well-nigh obliterated. A date over the door tells us that the chapel was erected in 1569.

The stillness of this quiet retreat is unbroken save by the unceasing song of a bird, and the occasional splash of a sheep drinking at the pool. As we linger here we become aware of something that the old pagans felt when their fancy peopled the woods and streams with nymphs and fawns, of the something which has prompted the superstitious in later days to regard some places as haunted by ghosts or inhabited by gnomes and fairies. There is a suggestion in the poem, very characteristic of Wordsworth, but rare in Browning, that Nature is self-conscious, that its stillness is not the mask of Death, but a veil of reticence, a studied reserve, practised by some mysterious spirit in the intrusive presence of man.

"The place is silent and aware;
It has had its scenes, its joys and crimes,
But that is its own affair."

Of one of these scenes the poet is also aware. One of its joys has been also the joy of his life. The fragrance of that memory

lingers yet in that haunted glen. There he and his wife walked once. Then, suddenly his day-dream is dissolved, he comes back to actuality, but not with any sense of disillusionment, for that which was best in his dream is there before him in reality. There his wife sits.

“Reading by firelight, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping it.”

As he gazes at her he thinks of all that she has been to him. She has glorified the past, which else he would not dare to recall. She will sanctify the future, which otherwise he would not dare to face. To others youth seems the flowery land and age the wilderness, but to him age, hallowed by her companionship, is so rich in blessing that beside it youth seems impoverished. Seldom has any man paid to his wife a higher compliment than this—

“My own, confirm me! If I tread
This path back, is it not in pride
To think how little I dreamed it led
To an age so blessed that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead?”

The passing of the years has brought them into more complete union, and when they face the mysterious future, the breaking-up of

earth, the dawning of heaven, it will be not as two, but as one united soul.

Yet he feels that she must always be a little before him, she must anticipate the new experiences by a hair's-breadth. Into so great and holy a thing has grown that love which first began upon the lower human plane, the drawing together of man and woman for mutual sympathy and companionship.

He invites her to go back with him and share the old memory, to retrace their footsteps to the beginning of the pathway, to revisit the spot where they saw together the dawning of love. Once more they listen together to the song of the bird, silenced now and again by fear, when two brown specks in the sky warn the small songster of the presence of the hawks. They linger there in fancy as the evening falls and the silence grows intense—again that strange silence that seems to betoken not incapacity for speech, but natural reserve, a silence that seems strained almost to breaking-point.

There they had walked whilst he had battled with unspoken love. They crossed the bridge, examined the chapel with its fresco, wondered at the moss, looked in through the window at the bare interior, noticed the date, and were

just recrossing the bridge on the way back when the great moment, charged with eternal issues, came. How well he remembers it all ! The little stream of water gliding beneath them as they stood on the bridge, the western sky, grey and tender, the one star shining above them. Nature, not inert, inanimate, unconscious, but alert, intent, sympathetic, weaving a magic spell, opening their eyes to see the wonderland of love, that old, old world which is ever new.

How different the sequel might have been, he thinks, had she held herself aloof when that crucial moment came. For he was held back by a timid fear. He was afraid to put his fortune to the test. A man may shake a tree that is clad in summer leaves and not grieve over the loss of a few out of so many, but if there is only one leaf left, and he craves that one for himself, he may well hesitate to shake the bough, lest some passing gust carry it far beyond his reach. Should it, however, fall of itself, and, eddying down, find his face, then he would keep and treasure it.

And that is the fortune that has befallen him. He feared to lose her friendship, but he won and kept her love. She gave, not sparingly and grudgingly, but fully and trustfully,

not tantalizing and testing him, but answering his love with fullest trust. They two became one in soul.

The barrier was broken down, the two streams which had been flowing side by side were now mingled into one river. The magic spell was wrought. The unseen powers of Nature had done their work. For an instant they had been interested in these two lovers, and had bent over them with their potent charms, but now, their task accomplished, they sank back into silence and indifference once more.

“The forests had done it; there they stood;
We caught for a moment the powers at play:
They had mingled us so, for once and good,
Their work was done—we might go or stay,
They relapsed to their ancient mood.”

It was life's resplendent moment for him. It marked his coronation as a king among his fellows; but he sees now that it had a social as well as an individual significance. It was his equipment for service to men. It was his ordination to the priesthood of humanity. The fulness of his manhood came to him when he won a woman's love. In that moment earth gained a man, and the gain of earth must be heaven's gain too.

"I am named and known by that moment's feat ;
There took my station and degree ;
So grew my own small life complete,
As nature obtained her best of me—
One born to love you, sweet !

In June 1855 Robert Browning and his wife returned from Italy to London, bringing with them some unpublished poems. Mrs. Browning was engaged upon *Aurora Leigh*, whilst her husband brought forty-nine out of the fifty poems which he was about to publish under the title *Men and Women*.

The last poem, which formed both the epilogue to the volume and its dedication, was written in their London home and was entitled "One Word More." It had his wife's initials, E. B. B., at the head of it, and it is perhaps the only poem in which he avowedly departs from his almost invariable rule of adopting a dramatic disguise. In it he speaks in his own person of the deepest and most sacred secret of his life—his love for his wife. Thus he dedicates to her the poetic firstfruits of their married life.

"There they are, my fifty men and women
Naming me the fifty poems finished !
Take them, Love, the book and me together :
Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also."

In the next stanza he tells how Rafael the

painter once wrote a hundred sonnets.¹ All the world might view his painting, only one might read his poetry. For La Fornarina, the woman he loved, and for her only, he became a poet. We can imagine how she cherished the book whilst she lived, and how she died with it by her pillow. We would rather read that book which would unlock the secrets of Rafael's heart than gaze upon all his celebrated pictures—his *Sistine Madonna* at Dresden, the *Madonna di Foligno* in the Vatican, the *Madonna* at Florence, that is represented as appearing to a worshipper in a vision; or *La Belle Jardinière* in the Louvre. These display the man's genius as it was known to the world. The sonnets reveal his heart as it was seen by the woman he loved. But we never shall see that book. When Rafael died a friend of his, Guido Reni, kept the book and treasured it. When Guido Reni died the book had disappeared for ever.

In the fifth stanza he tells a story of the poet Dante. He never in his life painted a picture. But he once tried to do so. He attempted to paint an angel. His one and

¹ Here, and in some other statements in this poem we must make a little allowance for a poetic licence that Browning rarely used.

only painting he meant to offer to Beatrice. Dante was interrupted, his picture was never finished. But Love, the power that made a painter into a poet, now all but succeeded in making a poet into a painter. What does it mean, then? This: that when a man loves he needs a new language. All his accustomed arts of expression fail to embody the new and wonderful passion that has come into his life; so he tries to find some fresh outlet for his feelings. If he is a painter he tries to become a poet; if a poet, then he turns to painting.

“ . . . No artist lives and loves, that longs not
Once, and only once, and for one only,
(Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language
Fit and fair and simple and sufficient.”

So the first reason that Browning gives for this strange transformation is the inadequacy of the accustomed language. The next reason is that the familiar act is soiled by the memory of past failures. In life's greatest achievements there is something that detracts from perfection. “Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement.”

A man chooses to record his love upon a clean sheet rather than upon a page soiled by handling in the past. When Moses smote

the rock to bring life-giving water to the perishing people, the great deed was marred by an infirmity of temper. He remembered how once before he smote the Egyptian; and the people mocked and cried, "Shall smiting help us?" And now, when the water gushed forth, they sneered, "A stroke is easy."

"Thus old memories mar the actual triumph;
Thus the doing savours of disrelish;
Thus achievement lacks a gracious somewhat."

The people irritated him, and his irritation marred his action. Then, further, the very fact of his standing in the position of leader and prophet to some extent dehumanized him. Before the crowd he had to be ever living up to his position. There was always the danger of a touch of professionalism. He could not show himself to the people simply as he was. He never might lay aside his dignity. "Never dares the man put off the prophet." But when Moses was in love with a woman, whether it were Jethro's daughter or the "Cushite woman," he would show another side of his character. He would speak to her, not as a prophet, but as a man. To her he would reveal a devotion and self-surrender of which the world could know nothing.

Then Browning turns to his wife. I can never paint pictures to express my love, nor carve statues, nor compose music. My only gift in this life is that of writing verse. That is the only tribute that I can offer you. Perhaps, when I get to heaven, God will endow me with other gifts.

"Other heights in other lives, God willing :

All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love !

But though he cannot do anything except write poetry, he has, in the poem which he now dedicates to her, attempted to write a different kind of poetry, in order that she may see a new side of his art, one which the world has not seen before.

Some artist, who has always hitherto painted great pictures for the world, might take a hairbrush to paint tiny flowers in the margin of his lady's Prayer Book. In like manner Browning, the dramatic poet, who speaks to men through the mouths of the characters he has created, now, in this poem, speaks intimately and personally to his wife, without any fictitious character intervening. Yet, he says, after all she does not need that he should try to reveal to her that which the world sees not, for full well she knows him.

He calls her attention to the moon, shining in its last quarter over the London housetops. A week or two before they had seen it as a new moon in Florence. They had watched it grow to the full, until it illuminated Samminiato (the church of San Miniato). Now that they are in London they see it as a pale silver crescent.

"What about the moon, then?" he asks. Just this. Suppose, as the fable tells, the moon were to fall in love with a mortal, and use all her magic to charm him, what would she do? The moon always turns the same side to the earth. There is a side which no man has ever seen. It is always turned away from us. Astronomers, philosophers, poets, have never seen it. If the moon were a maiden and could fall in love with a man upon earth, she would turn round in the heavens and show to that privileged mortal the side unseen by men before. But what that side is, whether it would prove to be terrible and big with fate, or glorious and wonderful as the throne of God, none knows, none ever shall know. So the world sees one side of a man's character, but the best of him is unseen, unknown, hidden in this life, save from the woman who loves him, and from the eyes of God.

"God be thanked, the meanest of His creatures
Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her!"

But whilst he speaks of himself he is thinking of her. What is true of one is true of the other. She also, his moon of poets, is revealed to the world through her writings. And, in common with the rest of the world, he sees that side of her character and praises it, glories in it. But the best of all is that which is known to him alone. The beauty and radiance of her spirit, shining in the sanctity of their home-life, fills him with reverent gratitude and wondering gladness, too deep for words.

"Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,
Where I hush and bless myself with silence.

Oh, their Rafael of the dear Madonnas,
Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,
Wrote one song—and in my brain I sing it,
Drew one angel—borne, see, on my bosom!"

We may rest assured that Browning knew from sacred and blest personal experience that God has bestowed upon a man earth's richest gift when He has granted to him the pure love of a good and gracious woman.

CHAPTER VI

AN INSPIRED SINGER

Human Love a Pledge of the Divine

IN the First Book of Samuel is recorded the story of the career of Saul, the first King of Israel, and the tragedy of his ultimate failure and rejection. He is depicted as a man of huge stature and magnificent physique, with great gifts, a strong will and turbulent passions. A powerful and successful warrior, his head was turned by his victories, and he rebelled against God's commandment, uttered through the mouth of Samuel. In punishment for his sin, we read that "an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him." It seems to have taken the form of melancholy madness. He had periods of deep dejection and insensibility to all outside influences. On the suggestion of his servants it was decided to try the influence of music in order to dispel his gloom and drive away the evil spirit, and a message was sent summoning David the

shepherd-singer in order to try the effect of his music upon the unhappy Saul. The result of the experiment was not only that the King was restored to sanity, but also that David became attached to Saul with all the passionate devotion of a young man's hero-worship.

This is the story that Browning has taken as the theme of his poem entitled *Saul*. In it we have the record of David's experience as related by himself on the morning after he had rescued the King from madness by means of his song. He tells of his strange interview, he recounts the songs he sang and their effect upon the distraught man, and finally records the great inspiration that visited him when his music was finished, and indicated its influence on himself, on Saul, and on the world around him. By a wonderful effort of imagination, Browning describes the genesis of prophecy in the soul of a prophet, and shows how the human love of David for Saul became a pledge and assurance of the Love of God.

The opening stanza tells how Abner, the captain of the host, greeted David at his first coming and related to him the story of the King's seizure. For three days and nights Saul had been shut up alone in the darkness

of the inner tent, silent and motionless. To his anxious servants, who were waiting and fasting outside, there had come no sound of praise or prayer to tell how the dreadful conflict went. But Abner, in his grief and despair, saw a message of hope in the shepherd-boy's youthful face and golden hair, and in the fresh lilies which were twined around his harp-strings to protect them from the heat.

On hearing the news David knelt in prayer, and then, rising, hastened to the royal pavilion. As he entered the outer tent it seemed dark to his eyes, blinded by the glare of the sun. He groped his way across the withered grass until he found the entrance to the inner tent, darker still and full of blackness to his unaccustomed sight. Again he prayed for help, and then boldly entered the enclosure where the giant King was fighting the terrible battle with his madness. "Here is David thy servant!" he cried, but deathly silence met him. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom he descried the upright prop in the centre of the tent, with a cross beam going from side to side. Then presently he could discern, by the help of a sunbeam struggling through a crevice, a great black figure leaning against

the upright with arms outstretched upon the cross support, as if a giant were hanging crucified in that dreadful place, or like a torpid serpent hanging from a pine tree, awaiting the new life that comes with the warmth of spring-tide. Fearlessly David took off the entwined lilies from his harp-strings, and, tuning his instrument, began to play.

Then follows a description of the songs by means of which he sought gradually to recall the King from his deathlike torpor, and to lead his soul step by step up towards fulness of life. He began with the music that awakens a response in the lower creatures. He sought to establish a bond of sympathy between that benumbed heart and the life of the animal world. At present Saul was like an inanimate log. If he could bring him back to the level of the conscious life of the brute creation it would be something gained. So he played the airs that the animals love, the shepherd-song to which the sheep respond when they are called to the fold at night-time, and—

“One after one seeks its lodging, as star follows star
Into eve and the blue far above us,—so blue and so far!”

Then followed the tunes that the quails love, that make the crickets leap, and that charm

the "quick jerboa." But whatever influence the music may have exercised, so far it was entirely subconscious : it awakened no visible response from the sufferer.

Then the musician rose to a higher level. He played the reapers' song of cheer and good fellowship ; he passed to the funeral dirge, with its low, wailing notes ; then, swiftly changing his mood, the wedding song rang out in jubilation ; and, once more changing, he played the march of the builders, the rhythmic chaunt of labour. So up and down he ran through the gamut of human emotion ; still the King stirred not. One resource was left him, and to that he turned. He touched the spring of religious emotion, as he played the chorus that the Levites intoned as they ascended the steps to the altar.

As that song, charged with holy memories, reached Saul's ears the tent thrilled and trembled with the strong man's shudders. The agony of returning life tortured him, as the quickening blood-flow brings suffering to a man rescued, by means of artificial respiration, from death by drowning. But Saul's recovery was as yet only very partial. His head trembled, but his body still hung inert. So David bent to his playing again.

His next theme was the Song of Life, celebrating first "the wild joys of living," the exultation of physical strength, the tingling of healthy blood coursing through the veins, the delights of intimate contact with Nature, the excitement of the chase, the refreshment of food and drink and sleep after the toils of the day. These simple pleasures that satisfy the natural appetites and elemental instincts of man's life form the opening theme of the song.

"How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ

All the heart and the soul and the senses for ever
in joy!"

Then follows the joy of home life, a reminder of the gracious influences that encircled the early days of childhood. There is a portrait of the venerable soldier-sire entrusting the sword that he can no longer wield to the proud hands of the youth who is to take his place in the ranks of the army. There is the figure of the aged mother lifting up her wasted hands, as she sings God's praises on a deathbed made beautiful by the white light of heaven. There are the help and the contest of brothers, the friends of boyhood, the long thoughts and fair hopes

of youth that look out of a glad present into a golden future.

All these are pictures of Saul's own early days—days of strenuous and wholesome life. Then David turns from the past to the present, from Saul's youth to his manhood, from the days of his obscurity to the splendour of his royalty. The song swells and gathers force and rises in triumphant crescendo, until the climax peals forth with the name of the hero—King Saul.

The slumbering soul was roused at last. As a sleeping soldier rouses at the bugle-call, Saul started at the sound of his name. It called to David's mind a scene on Mount Hermon, when the snow had gone from all the country round, and only on one shelf of rock a drift remained to tell of the winter that had gone, until at last "Spring's arrowy summons goes right to the aim," and—

"Fold on fold all at once it crowds thunderously down to
his feet,

And there fronts you, stark, black, but alive yet, your
mountain of old,

With his rents, the successive bequeathings of ages
untold—

Yea, each harm got in fighting your battles, each
furrow and scar

Of his head thrust 'twixt you and the tempest—all
hail, there they are !

Now again to be softened with verdure, again hold the
nest
Of the dove, tempt the goat and its young to the green
on his crest,
For their food in the ardours of summer."

So with Saul the deathly chill and numbness of spirit passed from him at the arrowy summons of David's song, and he stood released and aware.

Yet the work was only half done. "Death was past, life not come." His soul had been recalled from the black depths of despair, but he hesitated on the threshold, not daring, or not able, or not willing to return to the world of men. His eyes had in them the light of autumn sunsets, the reminiscent light that tells of the faded beauties and the dying glory of summer. He saw the past that lay behind him, but the allurements of the future had not yet called to him.

David pondered awhile as to what means he might yet use to win him back to a hopeful interest in life. He recalled some of the fancies that had come to him when he had mused as he watched his flocks, when his thoughts had busied themselves with that great, active, bustling world from which the shepherd-lad seemed so far removed. Schemes

of life, rules of conduct, the virtues of courage and prudence, he had woven these things into a simple system of ethics, and now they came back to him with new meaning, bearing a message for the King in his hour of need. Then he sang the Song of Fame and the Future.

All through his music he had been steadily rising from a lower to a higher plane. First he sang the songs of the animal creation, the music that charms the brutes; then he dwelt upon the animal life of man, the joy of mere living; then upon the domestic affections and the joys of home, rising at last to the splendour of the monarch upon his throne. Now he lifted Saul's thoughts to that higher life that sends forth influences far down the years.

He compared man's development to the growth of a palm-tree. In its early stages the young tree is in peril from passing animals. Then it grows, spreading its fair branches all around. Then it bursts into blossom and seems perfect. But the blossom is not its chief glory; the fruit is yet to come, and from the fruit is pressed the wine in which the spirit of the tree is poured forth for the healing and joy of men. The growth of the

tree symbolizes the fleshly life of man, ever in peril and ending inevitably in death and decay. The palm-wine is the type of man's spirit, spreading an influence that dies not with the decay of the lower life, but which works on in man's heart when that from which it sprang has crumbled into dust. So let Saul live that life of the spirit, and his influence will thrill the whole nation. As the sun looking down upon the earth everywhere traces the result of his own energy—

“ . . . so, each ray of thy will,
Every flash of thy passion and prowess, long over, shall
thrill
Thy whole people, the countless, with ardour, till they
too give forth
A like cheer to their sons, who in turn, fill the South and
the North,
With the radiance thy deed was the germ of.”

Then, with the eye of the seer, he invited Saul to look into the future, to the days when he would be dead, and in some vale there should rise his tomb, “a grey mountain of marble heaped four-square, till built to the skies.” Upon the rock above it would be engraved the record of his reign. His history would be recorded in letters of gold upon tablets of wood and scrolls of papyrus. Through the life of the spirit he would rule

an empire in the future and sway generations in the ages to come.

“So the pen gives unborn generations their due and
their part
In thy being ! Then, first of the mighty, thank God
that thou art !”

Then David breaks off, overwhelmed by the rush of memories. He feels that what followed was too solemn and wonderful for human speech. How to describe it he knows not. He prays for Divine help in recording the transformation that Divine power had wrought. He himself, as he tends his sheep in the morning light, can scarcely believe that on the previous night he had taken part in such marvels. He remembers how he had been rising from height to height in his song until he could soar no longer ; then God Himself had stooped down, and one lift of His hand had cleared the distance to God's throne from man's grave. And with that memory he resumes his story.

The effect of his song upon Saul had been to win him back to life and to restore to him his reason. The first evidence of his sanity was a care for his personal appearance. It is more than a figure of speech to refer to such a restoration as a man's “coming to himself.”

A disordered mind often results in disarrangement of appearance and dress, and when Saul came to himself he smoothed his ruffled locks, adjusted his turban, wiped the sweat from his brow, girded himself and put on his armlets. Then he sank back and sat down clothed and in his right mind.

At this point a question arises upon the answer to which our understanding of the whole poem depends.

What was the nature of Saul's malady, and how far had David's music hitherto been able to effect a cure? That the King was mentally afflicted, and that he had now been restored to the use of his reason, seems clear enough. But a little study of the poem, and of the Biblical narrative upon which it is based, reveals something more deep-seated than melancholia. The mental disturbance was the result of spiritual disorder. His mind had been unhinged by the turbulence of riotous and unruly passions.

Rebellion against the revealed will of God, pride in his own prowess, an unholy ambition that alienated him from communion with the unseen and darkened his soul, these were the true sources of his suffering. Of these disorders his melancholia was but a symptom,

and these radical evils of his nature were beyond the reach of David's music. They could not be charmed away by the spell of a song. Mentally he was restored: spiritually he was a ruin still, a magnificent ruin, the ruin of a splendid and kingly man, endowed with high powers and noble qualities, bearing a stamp of nobility which could never be altogether effaced, yet needing Divine help and healing before the fulness of his manhood could be restored.

As David raised himself from his playing, he felt, rather than understood, the yet unplumbed depths of the King's need, and with mingled admiration and pity he gazed upon the gigantic and heroic form before him. At last his solicitude awakened a responsive movement on the part of the King.

“ . . . He spoke not, but slow
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with
care
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow :
thro' my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my
head, with kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a flower.”

Then all the young man's heart went out in deep love and longing. David regarded Saul with all the enthusiastic devotion of a

youth's hero-worship, and his heart was filled with a passionate longing to help this fallen hero back to his lost manhood again. All he had done for him hitherto was as nothing compared with what he longed to do. He had given back to him his memory of the life of the past, but he knew that what Saul needed now was the life of the future, that eternal life that never knows failure or decay. For this he would willingly offer up himself as a sacrifice, if by so doing the King's life could be enriched. But the gift was not his to give; he felt the poignant agony of love's helplessness.

David's travail of soul proved to be the birth-pang of a new truth. The spirit of prophecy came upon him, and he laid aside his harp, ceased from his song, and declared to Saul the great discovery that God had made to his soul. His spirit had gone out, he said, to criticize God's creation, and he had returned to God with the verdict: "All's love, yet all's law." He was confronted by immensity.

He recognized in the work of God's hands almighty power guided and controlled by infinite wisdom. In all things he saw perfection, in all he recognized the presence of God—"in the star, in the stone, in the flesh,

in the soul and the clod." And by his adoration and submission, "with that stoop of the soul which in bending upraises it too," he felt himself lifted to the very feet of the Eternal. In all respects God was infinite and infinitely exceeded the noblest gifts of his noblest creature—man. Nay, not in all respects. In one thing, surely, and that the highest man was greater than the God who made him.

David felt within himself, if he dare but show it, a capacity for love and self-sacrifice that he could not attribute to the All-Perfect. God could not suffer for love's sake, and David knew in his heart that he could and would, if opportunity were given him. Then in so interpreting the nature of God in the light of what he knew of himself the great truth burst upon him. Surely it must be a God that loves infinitely who put into man's nature the capacity to love.

"What, my soul? see thus far and no farther? when
doors great and small,
Nine-and-ninety flew ope at our touch, should the
hundredth appal?
In the least things have faith, yet distrust in the
greatest of all?
Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it?
Here, the parts shift?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what Began?

Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,
And dare doubt He alone shall not help him, who yet
alone can?"

Verily the God who made him so wonderfully, who gifted him so highly, who prepared for him so glorious a sphere of action, having given him so many good things, will now go on and give him the best of all. The man will not be allowed to fall into ruin if love can effect his redemption. And infinite love allied with infinite power can surely save such a man as Saul, failure and ruin though he seems now, can dower him with an endless life, and can lead him triumphantly through the pain and strife of this world to the reward and repose of the world to come.

As David sees the truth, he hails it with acclamation. All good desires and holy impulses in men are the gifts of God. He Himself has perfectly that which men, at the best, have only in part. In us these longings to help and serve those we love are thwarted by lack of power. But in God's sight our impotent desires rank as service. "'Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man *Would* do!" David would willingly starve out his own life to enrich that of Saul.

If he has the will, but not the power, God has both will and power, and therefore God will do it. Then in a great flow of inspiration he sees afar off the vision of the suffering Christ, by His weakness and His pain redeeming the souls of men.

"Would I suffer for him that I love? So would'st Thou
—So wilt Thou!
So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost
crown—
And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor
down
One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no
breath,
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue
with death!
As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be proved
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of being Beloved!
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall
stand the most weak.
'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh,
that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it
shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to
me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand
like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See
the Christ stand!"

David's mission was ended and his work was done, but as he made his way home that night, he was conscious that through him a

new influence had come into the world, a new hope was born among men, a secret had been revealed, the wonder of which thrilled the courts of heaven and terrified the denizens of hell. He felt the powers of heaven and hell thronging round him as he struggled homewards. The very stars of the night seemed to beat with emotion, but the hand of God led him on and supported him, and quenched the tumult with quiet.

The next morning the earth was bathed in the tender light of a new hope. The very beasts and birds and creeping things felt its influence, and were awed and hushed by it. The flowers looked up with white, humid faces; the mystery worked in the heart of the cedar and in the bowers of the vine.

“And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent
and low,
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—‘E’en so, it
is so!’”

And so for David human love, pure, self-forgetting, undefiled, became the pledge and promise of the Love of God.

CHAPTER VII

"THE RELIGION OF A SAVAGE "

A Study in Natural Theology

"THIS is a strange thing as e'er I looked on," said Alonzo when first he caught sight of Caliban. And this creature which figures in *The Tempest* as part fish, part beast, and part man, is surely one of the strangest creatures of the genius of Shakespeare. It is, perhaps, intended to represent a primitive savage, the lowest type that could claim any share in our humanity. But its nature is described as something more than a mixture of the brute and the human; there is in it also a strain of the non-natural, the devilish.

In the days of Shakespeare very little was known about primitive man. Travellers had returned from distant countries with wild tales of fantastic creatures which they met on their journey. Their descriptions, though probably based upon fact, were coloured with the tints of their unbridled imagination, and

altogether lacked scientific accuracy. The days of comparative anthropology had not yet dawned.

From such unreliable, confused and contradictory material Shakespeare evolved the character of Caliban. He is described as a freckled whelp, not honoured with a human shape, the son of a witch, a slave who never yields a kind answer. He is employed by Prospero to fetch wood, make fires and to render menial service. A most lying slave whom stripes may move, not kindness. He would not take any print of kindness, but was capable of all ill. Licentious and obscene, he knew nothing of decency or gratitude. When Prospero found him he was ignorant of the use of language, but would gabble like a thing most brutish. With patience and care he had been taught to speak, and he used the gift of language to call down curses upon his teacher. He had in his composition at least the elements of imagination and poetry, as the language of his curses indicates—

“As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed,
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both!”

He can be controlled by nothing except

physical pain and by the fear of suffering. The witch Sycorax, his mother, had taught him the existence of a god called Setebos. Though how she had taught him, if, as Prospero says, he knew nothing of language, it is difficult to imagine. He is ready to worship a drunken butler who gives him wine, and believes him when he says that he is the man in the moon. He tries to incite the butler to murder his master, and he is indeed, as Prospero says—

“A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick ; on whom my pains
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost ;
And as with age his body uglier grows,
So his mind cankers.”

Such is the Caliban of Shakespeare's play. A grotesque and repulsive creature, so vaguely outlined that we cannot form any clear picture of his outward appearance, and of whom the mental and spiritual make-up seems to consist of malice, obscenity, cunning, cowardice, sloth and cringing servility. And this is the creature that Browning takes, and uses as the mouthpiece of the natural theology of a savage.

It would not be fair to try to hold the nineteenth-century poet down to all the details

and limitations of the playwright of the sixteenth century. If we attempt to do so we shall soon find that we cannot make the later Caliban square with the earlier. It has been said that Browning's Caliban has the introspective powers of a Hamlet and the theology of an evangelical churchman; and, whilst we may regard this statement as a humorous exaggeration, it is scarcely too much to say that Browning's savage has to bear upon his misshapen shoulders the whole burden of the primitive theology of mankind. But it is that theology as it was conceived by educated men in Browning's day. And, though the knowledge of the middle of the nineteenth century is recent and scientific compared with the ignorance of the days of Shakespeare, we must remember that the birth of the science of comparative religion and the scientific study of ethnological problems are of more recent date than the publication of the poem entitled "Caliban upon Setebos."

The opening lines give us a picture of the luxury of a savage. During the noontide heat Caliban is sprawling in the mud in the mouth of a cave, kicking his feet in the slush, and laughing with enjoyment, as he feels

small creeping things run over him and in and out of his armpits. The sensations that to civilized man would be loathsome are to him a source of keen delight. A creeping plant growing over the top of the cave hangs down and tickles his hair and beard. Flowers, with bees inside them, drop at intervals, and now and again a ripe fruit falls within reach which he greedily devours. This is life at the brute level. Its enjoyments are such as would appeal to swine.

The next lines, however, mark the rise from the brute to the man. This foul beast wallowing in the filth has in him the germ of poetry. So far as we can interpret the mind of an animal, it has no appreciation of natural scenery as such. It may scan a landscape, but it is in order to look for prey, or for some object that interests it; never, so far as we can judge, because it feels the charm of beauty. But this Caliban, this animal that is only just a man, has at least a dim feeling of the beauty of Nature.

“He looks out o’er yon sea which sunbeams cross
And recross till they weave a spider-web—
(Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times).”

And thus sprawling, thus gazing, he talks aloud to himself. He begins to speculate

about "that other, whom his dam called God." It is a pleasure to him to talk of Setebos because it is a forbidden theme. The subject is taboo. In the early development of the religious instinct there is often found a superstitious fear of mentioning the name of the Deity. It is an act of ill-omen to talk about Him. Many savage tribes, communicative on other subjects, become reticent when asked about their gods. Even to the Jews the designation of the Deity was an ineffable name. And amongst civilized people to-day the common reticence observed with regard to religious subjects may perhaps in part be due to a lingering and unacknowledged superstition that it is unlucky to talk of God. Caliban puts it bluntly—"to talk about him vexes."

But now, safe in the secrecy of his cave, he can add to the luxury of physical enjoyment the pleasure of moral licence. He can talk about Setebos and not be found out. Then, too, this warm summer-noon is the safest time in which to take liberties. The cold is what Caliban most dreads. The cruel biting winds are the instruments of torture that he most fears; and now he is safe from these for the time being. Setebos is deprived

of his most powerful weapon. Another thought adds to the sweetness of wrongdoing. He is supposed to be working for Prospero, but just now his master and Miranda are asleep, so he can gibe at his god and defraud his employer at the same time. And all these circumstances taken together constitute Caliban's idea of earthly happiness. In that comfortable frame of mind he assumes the rôle of theologian.

First he tries to determine his god's habitat.

"Thinketh He dwelleth i' the cold o' the moon."

The moon looks a cold place to Caliban. Cold means discomfort, and he is sure that Setebos must be an uncomfortable person, for reasons that will presently appear. What, then, is the power of this god? What are his works and attributes? He is a creator, but only a limited creator. He made the moon, the sun, clouds, winds, meteors and such as that; the island, which is the whole world to Caliban, with what lives and grows thereon, and the snaky sea which encircles it about. The stars he did not make. They seem to belong to a different order of creation, they are still and remote and silent. They do not

bear the hall-mark of this restless, irritable god. They came otherwise.

Why, then, did Setebos make all these things? What is the purpose of creation? It all came of his being ill at ease, Caliban thinks. He was cold and uncomfortable like a fish that has been accustomed to live in the icy water of an inland stream and, swimming one day down to the sea, finds the sun-warmed brine pleasant; yet it has to turn back from the comfortable warmth into the chilly stream again, because it is a freshwater fish and cannot live in the salt sea. So Setebos "i' the cold o' the moon" made things in spite, or sport, or listlessness.

With the keen observation of a savage Caliban describes some of the works of Setebos.

" . . . He made thereat the sun, this isle,
Trees and the fowls here, beast and creeping thing.
Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech;
Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,
That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown
He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye
By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue
That pricks deep into oak-warts for a worm,
And says a plain word when she finds her prize,
But will not eat the ants; the ants themselves
That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks
About their hole. He made all these and more."

All these things, weak yet wonderful, were made by Setebos because he could not make a second self to be his mate, and so fashioned creatures weaker than himself in most respects, yet in a few points stronger than he, that they might be his playthings.

Just as Caliban himself in some drunken frolic, envying the birds their power of flight, might make a bird out of clay, and, if he had the power, would breathe life into it, give it wings, adorn it with a comb, arm it with a sting and amuse himself with the toy he had made. Then if the little creature broke off one of its clay legs in trying to do him service he would laugh at its helplessness, and if it wept and besought his help—well, it would all depend upon his mood. He might either overwhelm it with kindness and give it three sound legs for one, or, on the other hand, he might cruelly tear off the remaining leg to teach it to respect his powers. That is how Setebos deals with men. He is neither moral nor immoral, he is non-moral. He is neither kind nor cruel, merely capricious. In fact, he is nothing but a great savage, the shadow of Caliban himself thrown upon the sky.

All the time that this primitive theologian is describing his deity, he is really portraying

his own character, if the word "character" can be applied to such a bundle of confused, chaotic and contradictory impulses.

"He is strong and Lord.

'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
That march now from the mountain to the sea ;
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so,
'Say, the first straggler that boasts purple spots
Shall join the file, one pincer twisted off ;
Say, this bruised fellow shall receive a worm,
And two worms he whose nippers end in red ;
As it likes me each time, I do : so He."

Power exercised arbitrarily and capriciously with careless disregard of the pleasure or pain of the creatures, this is Caliban's conception of the activity of his god. Yet he regards Setebos as good-natured on the whole, if only we knew how to get to the right side of him. He is envious and jealous of his creatures if they seem to show powers that he has not got, and woe to them if they vaunt those powers; he will soon show them who is master. Caliban himself has made a pipe that, when blown through, imitates the scream of a wounded jay, and snares the other birds; but if that pipe began to boast that it could sound a note which its maker was unable to do, he would smash it with his foot, and put an end to its boasting. That is how Setebos deals

with men who pride themselves upon their achievements.

Then Caliban begins to dive deeper into the problems of philosophy.

He has postulated Setebos as an explanation of the created world around him, and of the haps and chances of life. But Setebos himself raises further problems. Behind this immediate cause he seeks for an ultimate cause. Why is this uneasy deity so uncomfortable and spiteful? What compels him to dwell in the cold of the moon? It suggests the idea that there may be "something over Setebos," whether his maker or his enemy.

"There may be something quiet o'er His head,
Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief,
Since both derive from weakness in some way."

So Caliban gropes after the thought of an impassive god beyond the stars, a god who has all power and neither rejoices nor suffers. But as this "Quiet" does not seem to concern himself about the world, Caliban does not trouble about him.

Setebos, "the many-handed as a cuttlefish," is the deity with whom he has to do. He thinks he can understand why his god made the world. Once more he finds the

explanation in his own experience. He remembers how recently when he saw his master, the magician Prospero, busy with his books, clothed in his enchanter's robes and using his magic wand, he became envious of his powers, and as he could not attain to them in reality, he indulged in a game of make-believe. He made for himself a book of broad leaves, and scrawled over it. He fashioned a wand and gave it a name. He made a robe out of a skin. He keeps a captive ounce that he calls Miranda, a pouch-bill crane that he names Ariel, and a lumpish sea-beast which he snared, blinded, and now keeps in a hole in the rock, and which does duty for Caliban himself. And with this make-believe retinue he plays at being Prospero and finds it capital sport.

That is why Setebos made the world. It is a bauble world to ape the real in which "the Quiet" dwells, and he likes to amuse himself with it and to show his power over it. At this point the theology of Caliban seems to be a strange compound of Plato's doctrine of "ideas," and the pessimism of Thomas Hardy who regards life's tragedies as the sporting of the President of the Immortals with human souls! In evolving

this theory he has departed from his ancestral faith. His mother, the witch Sycorax, had taught him that "the Quiet made all things which Setebos vexed only."

She regarded Setebos as a devil who disturbed the good creation of God. Caliban, however, does not think so. If the world was made by a good god, why did he not do his work better? Why not have made it so strong that the devil couldn't vex it? A question that has puzzled many besides Caliban! "No," he argues, "the god who made things weak '*meant* weakness he might vex.' "

Another question arises. Is it probable that Setebos really cares for any of his creatures, that he likes or loves them? Caliban thinks not. The only love of which he can conceive is a lively sense of favours to come. He himself likes those from whom he expects a kindness. The lumpish sea-beast, whose eyes he put out, likes him because he feeds it when it cannot see to hunt for itself. But Setebos has eyes. He is not dependent on any one. So no element of kindness, or liking, can enter into his relationship with his creatures. No, Caliban gets back to his old hypothesis. He made it all out of sport,

or say, from love of doing something, with no ulterior object.

“Also it pleaseth Setebos to work,
Use all His hands, and exercise much craft,
By no means for the love of what is worked.”

Caliban himself, when he is well-fed and comfortable, enjoys using his powers in making something for no special object other than the exercise of his activity. He has just piled up a heap of turfs and ornamented it with white chalk, spikes of trees and a sloth's skull, and before long he will knock it down again. It is the desire for self-expression, the first emergence of the artistic faculty in the brain of a savage, and, though he knows it not, his motive in building that decorated pile of turf is not altogether unrelated to the delight of a Rafael in painting his masterpiece. If Caliban could have put his theory into modern phrase he would have spoken of the Creator as the Master-Artist, and he would have talked about “art for art's sake.”

Be this how it may, of one thing he is sure, and that is that Setebos is a very terrible being and has a spite against him, but he seems to favour Prospero. For example, he—

“Wove wattles half the winter, fenced them firm
With stone and stake to stop she-tortoises

K

Crawling to lay their eggs here : well, one wave,
Feeling the foot of Him upon its neck,
Gaped as a snake does, lolled out its large tongue,
And licked the whole labour flat : so much for spite.

Then the question of most practical importance for Caliban is how to propitiate this capricious tyrant. Prospero seems to have found out the secret, but he will not divulge it. And certainly Setebos himself will not give it away. That would spoil his sport. The only principle that Caliban can discover is that it is not wise to try the same way twice.

"Repeat what act has pleased, He may grow wroth.
You must not know His ways, and play Him off,
Sure of the issue."

In that respect also Caliban imagines that his god is like himself. He sometimes spares a venturesome squirrel because he is pleased with its pluck and impudence. On the other hand he may spare an urchin because it shows such fear of him. But if he thought that these creatures knew his likes and dislikes and traded upon them, saying to themselves, "because he has done so once he must do so again," he would soon make short work with them and teach them what "must" meant. The suggestion of any law of self-consistency seems to Caliban like a limitation of power.

Absolute irresponsible caprice he regards as a mark of divinity. Hence the hopelessness of trying to form any plan of conduct to placate Setebos. This seems to indicate an even lower stage of development than that of most savage tribes, who have their priests or medicine-men to instruct them in those rites and ceremonies whereby their gods may be propitiated. To this savage the deity was altogether incalculable.

Then Caliban plunges into eschatology. He wonders what will be the outcome of all this topsy-turvydom of life. He supposes that Setebos will always continue to plague his creatures; unless, indeed, he should take it into his head to make a new world somewhere that interested him more than this. In that case he might cease to watch men, and would leave them alone. Or perhaps he might attack and conquer the deity above him, and wrest from him his throne. Then Setebos would be quiet, for he would be happy. He would cease to torment his creatures, for he would have escaped from that "cold o' the moon that" that makes him irritable. Or lastly, perhaps there may be some kind of evolution going on amongst the gods, and Setebos may gradually develop

into "the Quiet" as from the grub there emerges the butterfly. If none of these things happen there seems nothing for it but to endure his spite with what patience we can until Death releases us.

But will it release us? That is a further question. Caliban thinks that it will; though in this again he departs from his mother's faith. Sycorax held that there was another life beyond this, in which Setebos plagued his enemies and feasted his friends. But her son doesn't believe it. It seems to him that the deity tortures men just up to the limit of their endurance and reserves his worst pain for the last, because he knows that after they are dead he can do no more to them. If this is his plan it suggests one method by which we might obtain partial relief, and that is by exaggerating our misery. It does not do to let him think that we are too happy, for then he sees that we can bear more suffering without escaping from his clutches. We are wise to persuade him that we are as miserable as we can be, then he will not add anything more to our burden lest death should come and release us.

That is Caliban's philosophy of life, a philosophy that does not seem to be altogether

out of fashion with some people to-day. Then he illustrates his theory on the spot. He sees above him two gaudy flies basking in a flower-bell. They seem too happy, so he strikes at them and crushes them. On the ground near by are two miserable looking beetles striving to push a ball over a stick that impedes their path. They look unhappy enough to be allowed to live, and he even eases their toil by removing the stick. Caliban is determined for his part to play the rôle of the beetle.

"Even so, 'would have Him misconceive, suppose
This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,
And always, above all else, envies Him ;
Wherefore he mainly dances on dark nights,
Moans in the sun, gets under holes to laugh,
And never speaks his mind save housed as now :
Outside, 'groans curses."

But suppose Setebos were somehow to overhear all this and tax Caliban with it, what should he do? Why by some means he would have to appease the outraged deity. He would mutilate himself, cut a finger off. He would burn as a sacrifice the best of his three kid yearlings. He would let the ripe apples rot on the tree, or deliver his tame beast to be devoured by an orc. And whilst the sacrifice was being offered he would sing

a song expressive of devotion and humility. Some have seen in these lines a description of the origin of sacrifice as a mode of worship. If that is so, it seems to differ in object and intention from the sacrifices of most savage tribes, as well as from the Biblical description of the origin of the rite.

Caliban does not seem to have any thought of giving anything to enrich his god: his one idea is that of voluntarily impoverishing himself in order to placate the wrath of heaven. It thus differs on the one hand from the lowest common conception of sacrifice, which is that of sharing a meal or appeasing the gods with gifts, and on the other hand it has nothing in common with that higher type of asceticism which aims at the emancipation of the spirit through the mortification of the flesh. As Caliban contemplates these dangers he hopes that the rule of Setebos, like other evils, may sometime either be mended or ended. Either the god over Setebos may conquer him, or he may fall into decrepitude, "may doze, doze, as good as die."

When suddenly, in the midst of Caliban's musing, he lifts his eyes and sees a black thundercloud rolling up towards him. He notices that strange stillness of bird- and

insect-life that betokens the near approach of a storm. For a moment the stillness is broken by the flight of a scudding raven—the bird of ill-omen. It flashes upon Caliban's mind that that winged messenger is a familiar spirit that has been on a tell-tale errand and revealed to Setebos all Caliban's blasphemous words. And now the god is angry with him. What a fool he has been to give his tongue rein like this! The wind is rising. The columns of dust are rolling on. "Death's house o' the move!" The lightnings flash. A thunderbolt strikes and smashes a tree top. The peals of thunder roll and bellow and reverberate. Caliban falls flat upon his face. He bites his lips till the blood comes. He shrieks in terror his vows to his god.

"Will let those quails fly, will not eat this month
One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape!"

Is this poem a scientific analysis of the origin of religious belief, or a satire upon anthropomorphic systems of theology? It does not seem to be wholly either of these things, and yet it partakes of the nature of both. It has a scientific basis without being strictly scientific. It ridicules a base and unworthy anthropomorphic method of interpreting the mind of God, without attacking

a legitimate and necessary attempt to understand the Divine by means of what is best and highest in human nature. In other words it is right to say as David does in the poem *Saul*: "Would I suffer for him that I love? So would'st Thou. So wilt Thou!" It is foolish and degrading to say as Caliban does: "As it likes me each time I do. So He."

We may read the Name of God in the light of the best we find in ourselves; we must not ascribe to the Divine Nature the limitations and the imperfections of the human.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ARTIST'S DESPAIR

The Soul's Craving for an Endless Life

FROM *Caliban* to *Cleon* is an immense stride onwards and upwards in the progress of humanity, in the development of man's theories concerning the spiritual and the Divine. The one stands for the lowest level of human intelligence, the first groping of man's soul after the unseen and unknown God. The other represents the flower of the noblest civilization of the pre-Christian world, the weariness of a mind that has adventured on the most sublime flights of philosophy, that has followed many a daring course of speculation, and has found always at the end nothing but vanity and vexation of spirit.

In form the poem entitled *Cleon* is an answer sent by a Greek artist, who is also a poet and philosopher, in reply to a letter that accompanied a ship's cargo of presents

dispatched to him by Protos, a tyrant or king of one of the states of Greece. It reveals something of the character and endowments of the two correspondents, it portrays the splendour of the later Greek civilization, and it expresses the heart-hunger of men who realize the inadequacy of the present life to meet the deeper needs of the soul. In all these respects it is a study of great power and of absorbing interest.

The scene is laid in one of the isles of Greece, sprinkled like lilies on the blue surface of the Ægean Sea. The time is the decadence of Greek civilization, when the flower of its culture was long past its best, and was now on the point of withering and falling away. The liberty and political independence which had been the boast of the early Greeks was already a matter of ancient history. More than three centuries previously the Empire of Alexander the Great had risen in its pride, reared upon the ruins of Greek Independence. After a brief and splendid history it had succumbed before the military might of the Roman armies. For a long time the political supremacy of Rome had been unchallenged, and Macedonia, Achaia, the Ægean islands and the Ionian seaboard, in fact all that once

was Greece, had fallen into place as parts of the peaceful provinces of the great empire.

But the spirit of the Greek nation was not unavenged. If Rome held the reins of government, Greece retained the intellectual supremacy of the world. Not only did the Greek culture maintain its sway in Greece itself and amongst the colonies that it had founded, but it swept in its conquering career across the great Roman Empire and made itself mistress of Imperial Rome herself. When at last it fell from its high estate, it was overthrown, not by the mailed fist of Rome, nor by the ruthless barbarity of Goths and Vandals, but by the uprising of a culture destined to be higher and more widespread than its own. The rival that eventually triumphed over it and superseded it was the religion and civilization of Christianity. The poem *Cleon* depicts for us the proud and resplendent pagan culture of Greece, at the moment of its first contact with the almost unnoticed and wholly despised sect of Christians.

The opening lines of the poem give us a graphic picture of Cleon sitting in his island-home, writing in the sunset light an answer to the letter which has just come to hand, an acknowledgment of the wealth of presents

which are still being unloaded from the galley drawn up, with shipped oars and furled sails, at the wharf hard by.

“They give thy letter to me, even now :
I read and seem as if I heard thee speak.
The master of thy galley still unlades
Gift after gift ; they block my court at last
And pile themselves along its portico
Royal with sunset, like a thought of thee.”

In front of him is a paved courtyard, wrought in chequer-work by the men of his nation, and presented to the poet as a tribute to his gifts. It is now covered by a crowd of black and white slaves, the gift of Protos, a living mosaic superimposed upon that wrought in stone, or, as the fancy suggests itself to Cleon, like a settle-down of doves. From amongst them one white woman in a crocus vest, a girl whose beauty is a poem in itself, draws near to him and offers a goblet of wine, which Protos has previously touched with his lips in token of greeting and good fellowship. Cleon compliments the King upon his judicious generosity. In honouring the poet Protos has done himself honour. For Cleon takes the gifts as a tribute to his art, and they betoken a donor whose spirit has risen above crass materialism, and who recog-

nizes the spiritual meaning of life and the power of art to enrich man's spirit. Some time previously Protos had expressed himself and typified his aspirations in one symbolic act. He had been long engaged upon the building of a great tower, and when the work was completed and the scaffolding removed, men admired its soaring height.

To the vulgar the tower seemed an end in itself, a monument of the King's greatness, but to Protos it was a means to an end: it afforded a vantage-point for a distant view, it was an observatory from which he could gaze upon the sun. It was an emblem of his own life soaring heavenwards and looking afar. Cleon understood the inner significance of that tower, and in honour of the King's high aspiration he promised to pour an annual libation on the birthday of Protos, and to make the slave-girl relate his noble deeds to the accompaniment of the poet's prayers.

"Wishing thee wholly where Zeus lives the most,
Within the eventual element of calm."

Then Cleon begins to answer the questions which the King has asked in his letter. Wonderful tidings of the poet's achievements have reached Protos, and he seeks to know whether they are true or exaggerated reports.

Cleon complacently acknowledges all these triumphs as his. He had, indeed, written that *epos* inscribed upon a hundred plates of gold. He had composed the little chant which the fishermen sing when they haul their nets. He had designed the wondrous image of the sun-god upon the lighthouse. The portico at Athens, known to fame as the Pœcile, with its great frescoes was his work. The anatomy of man and woman he had studied exhaustively, and enriched the science with his own discoveries. In philosophy his work had been destructive and critical. He had refuted all previous writers on the doctrine of the human soul, but had built up no doctrine of his own, leaving men in blank agnosticism. Of music also he was a master, and by combining the old moods had invented a new one.

Poet, composer, musician, painter, architect, sculptor and philosopher, he had made all the arts his handmaids, and had trodden all the beaten tracks of thought. How, then, did he compare with the ancient masters, the great men of old whose names were venerated as supreme in the practice of the arts? In some respects he acknowledged that their supremacy was still unchallenged. The men of to-day had not eclipsed their achievements. They

were not, and they could not, be superseded. The mosaic work before him furnished a parable. There the artist who designed the chequered pavement of the courtyard had laid the variously shaped pieces side by side, not covering the old with new, but making one complementary to the other, in fulfilment of his design. In like manner the Great Artist who planned our human race made the gifts of men of later days in some way supplementary to the achievements of the past. They did not blot them out, but carried forward that which was already perfect in its own degree to a new and higher perfection. As in a picture each face may be perfect in itself, yet when the design is completed the grouping of the figures adds a new perfection of its own. Or, to use Cleon's own figure, a drop of water inside a hollow crystal globe may touch and rest upon one point of its circumference, and, by gradually revolving the globe, we may make the drop touch every other point in turn. But fill the globe with moisture-laden air, and the vapour will settle on every part at once. So the men of older time, here one and there another, reached the circumference of life's possibilities, this one in painting, that in sculpture, a third in music.

It was impossible for men of later days to do more than these severally had already done. The only progress possible would be to combine these various achievements into the record of one life. And, indeed, Cleon has at times dreamed of such a possibility. Suppose some god should become incarnate upon earth and show to us the ideal human life, should we not then see a man in whom all diverse perfections were combined into one perfect whole, all the disjointed notes resolved into one perfect harmony, all the prismatic colours recombined into one clear white light? Then there would be revealed to us the goal towards which humanity is struggling upwards. We should see what God meant us to be.

So Cleon's aspirations were seeking for an artistic, not a moral, ideal—a super-man, not a Christ. This vision of human perfection, however, he dismissed as an impracticable dream. No such incarnation had appeared. Still he hoped that progress at least was no dream. It was evident in the world around him. The very fruits of the earth improved in richness and flavour through the care and cultivation of men. The flowers developed new beauties as the result of culture. As he looked at the slave-girls whom Protos had sent, he even

imagined that the graces of womanhood were maturing into a more gracious beauty than was seen in earlier days. Then was the soul alone exempt from this law of progress and development? Surely there also they might trace the same wondrous evolution, the blossoming of new grace, the fruitage of centuries of culture. In himself he was conscious of a breadth of power unknown in former times.

"I have not chanted verse like Homer, no—
Nor swept string like Terpander, no—nor carved
And painted men like Phidias and his friend:
I am not great as they are, point by point.
But I have entered into sympathy
With these four, running these into one soul,
Who, separate, ignored each other's art.
Say, is it nothing that I know them all?"

The souls of these men were the wild flowers of the human race. His soul, the cultivated flower, has a more delicate tint, a richer sweetness, than they. No false humility should deter him from proclaiming this progress which he recognized as the gift of the gods.

Then Cleon turned to answer the King's next question. Protos had written to this effect: "Thou, Cleon, with thy various arts and manifold achievements, hast surely attained to the best that life has to offer.

Thou hast climbed the ladder of success to its topmost rung. Thou hast won from the world its plaudits. Men have enthroned thee in their hearts. Thou hast graven for thyself an imperishable name. And now that thou art near the end of life, how dost thou face the prospect of death? Is it not shorn, for thee, of its worst terror? Thou hast achieved immortality in thy works. In thy poems and in thy pictures thou wilt live for ages to come.

"As for me, Death will be the end of everything. Nothing that I have done will immortalize me. Even that brazen statue set on the promontory, meant to commemorate my reign, even that some time-serving courtier will probably destroy after I am dead in order to curry favour with my heir. With me to be gone will be to be forgotten. Death will be annihilation. But thou, who wilt survive in the immortality of thine art, dost surely fear Death less than we who are but men of to-day."

That is the query that Cleon set himself to answer. First he pointed out that with the growth of knowledge man's capacity for admiration increases, and admiration is the mother of art. All the higher forms of pleasure have their root in man's power to

admire. And next he urged that present imperfection is a pledge of perfection to come. Conscious emptiness implies subsequent fulness.

With those two thoughts in mind he invited Protos to imagine himself standing upon the earth in the early days of creation before man had yet been made. He would have seen all living creatures each perfect in its way, and yet suggesting a further perfection still to come. And had Zeus, the creator, asked him to suggest what yet was lacking, he would doubtless have replied that the animals were so adapted to their environment as to be happy in their way. All that could be done now was to create a being who should not only be happy, but be conscious of his happiness. A self-conscious creature could attain to delights that were impossible to mere instinctive life. He would not only live, but he would realize the joy of life. And the more completely he realized himself the more joy-giving would his life become.

Such would probably have been the King's answer had Zeus consulted him. But Cleon thought the King would have been wrong, and Zeus himself had made a mistake in giving to man his self-conscious life. It

would have been better to have left him on a level with the brutes. For the brutes had attained to perfection in their own way, but in man alone was failure found. And his failure arose from that new self-conscious spiritual life. That new life, like a watch-tower overlooking a plain, had risen in splendid supremacy over the surrounding levels of the brute creation, and the soul of man had laboriously climbed that tower, only to perish on its summit.

For what had man's spiritual nature brought him? Not infinite joy, but endless capacity for enjoyment. Not inexhaustible satisfaction, but an unceasing hunger. Man's elevation over the animals had brought him, not more happiness than they, but more desire for happiness. And, indeed, men were wearing themselves out with their unsatisfied longings, and so got even less satisfaction than the lower creatures who knew nothing of mental weariness or spiritual hunger. Then Cleon illustrates his meaning.

"They praise a fountain in my garden here
Wherein a Naiad sends the water-bow
Thin from her tube ; she smiles to see it rise.
What if I told her, it is just a thread,
From that great river which the hills shut up,
And mock her with my leave to take the same ?

The artificer has given her one small tube
Past power to widen or exchange—what boots
To know she might spout oceans if she could?
She cannot lift beyond her first thin thread :
And so a man can use but a man's joy
While he sees God's."

What, then, Cleon asks, was the meaning of it all? Why had Zeus dealt thus with us? Was it malice—had he merely given us this insatiable longing for happiness in order to tantalize us? That was incredible. Was it, then, mere indifference, just carelessness and mistake? That seemed equally out of the question. And yet there seemed no token of Divine care, no sign that the gods took any interest in our fate. It was all a black, unfathomable mystery, and the more he pondered it, the profounder grew his discouragement. He agreed with the King. To see the wider was but to sigh the more. Most progress was most failure.

But Protos in his letter had said that he supposed that an artist such as Cleon must be happier than other men. He knew more of what joy was. His poems and paintings lived and throbbed with joy. In them the artist would renew his youth and taste immortality. A twofold mistake, Cleon rejoined.

In the first place, the King had confounded

the knowledge of what joy is with the experience of joy itself. He had confused the art of showing how to live with actually living. Because the artist could paint or carve the figure of youth, it did not make him young. Nay, the years of toil in which he had mastered the craft of his art had aged him the more. The aged poet might write love-songs, but the fair slave-girl and the handsome young rower, with "muscles all a-ripple on his back," these enjoy the glow of love itself. Cleon knew the joy of kingship, but Protos was himself a king!

And the King's second mistake was in supposing that the immortality which an artist enjoys through his works was anything more than a figure of speech. They did not mean it literally when they said that the great writers of long ago were living still. Their works survived; they themselves did not. He challenged Sappho or Æschylus, dead long years before, to prove their immortality by wresting his slave from him, or drinking from his cup, or even so much as speaking in his place. And soon he knew he himself would be as powerless as they were now. So far from his artist-gifts making it easier for him to face death than it was for Protos, they

actually made the prospect more terrible. For as the days passed, his capacity for enjoyment, his hunger after happiness, grew keener and keener; and all the while, with the advance of age, death was creeping nearer and nearer. The horror was growing upon him with every indication of his failing powers. The closer death drew to him, the more he longed for life. To speak to him about living on in his works was the emptiest mockery.

“Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,
In this, that every day my sense of joy
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;
While every day my hairs fall more and more,
My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—
The horror quickening still from year to year,
The consummation coming past escape
When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy—
When all my works wherein I prove my worth,
Being present still to mock me in men’s mouths,
Alive still, in the praise of such as thou,
I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man,
The man who loved his life so over-much,
Sleep in my urn.”

So horrible is the thought to him that at times it had driven him to dream of the possibility of a future life. It had seemed to him as though some opportunity must be given to men to exercise those powers, to satisfy those longings, for which this earthly life is

far too short and cramped and limited. If that were so he could understand the meaning of that unsatisfied hungering after joy, that impatience with limitations that torments men here. It would all be meant to make the soul seek and strive after the fuller life. Then death would be but the throbbing impulse by which the chrysalis bursts into the butterfly. It would be the gateway to a fuller, larger, higher life.

But these, he knew, were but the dreams of idle hours, the fiction of an ill-regulated mind. Had there truly been another life beyond this one, the gods would surely have revealed the fact to men. But the lips of Zeus were silent, the dark grave kept its secret, no voice had spoken from another world, no hand had lifted the black curtain that shrouds the future. If hope there had been, some message would have surely come. The silence was eloquent of despair. The best message he could send to Protos was this--

"Live long and happy, and in that thought die :
Glad for what was ! Farewell."

There is but one thing that could heighten the pathos of Cleon's despair. And that one thing is found in the postscript to his letter.

It seems that the King had heard some rumour of the preaching of Paul and of his proclamation of immortality in Christ. Anxious to learn more, he had sent a letter by a messenger and asked Cleon to direct his servant, if haply he knew where Paul might be found. The poet treated the whole matter contemptuously. He had, indeed, heard of this barbarian Jew and his preaching, but he had taken so little interest in the matter that he was not sure whether Paul and Christ were not the same person. He neither knew nor cared to know where he could be found. To him it seemed little less than an insult to the philosophy and culture of Greece to suppose for a moment that a mere ignorant barbarian could answer questions that had baffled the greatest sages of their nation. He had heard, indeed, that some slaves, disciples of this Paul, had landed once on his own island and preached there. He himself had not condescended to listen to them, but he was assured on the testimony of a bystander that "their doctrine could be held by no sane man."

And so, with the lofty disdain of Greek culture, he spurned, as unworthy of consideration, that Christianity which alone could

answer the deepest questions of his soul, could lift the darkness of his despair and reveal to him the secret that he sought. A Voice had, indeed, spoken from out of the great silence, but he stopped his ears against it; a light had broken through the darkness of death, but he turned his face away.

The reason for Cleon's failure to apprehend the revelation was his lack of moral earnestness. All his dreams of the future were tinged by the tints of material things. His aspirations were for the endless gratifications of his artistic instincts. There seemed nothing in him to which the spiritual and Divine could make their appeal. He sought a heaven of his own fashioning, and, in his intellectual pride and scornful contempt, he turned away from the revelation of that Christianity which was "to the Greeks foolishness."

CHAPTER IX

THE LETTER OF A PHYSICIAN

Broken Lights of Divine Revelation

IN the poem *Cleon* we saw Christianity at its first point of contact with the pagan culture of Greece. In the *Epistle of Karshish* we see a reflection of the Christian light falling upon the occult lore of the East. Cleon, in his pride of philosophic intellect, refused even to inquire into the Christian religion, and he ended with a shuddering horror of death and an utter despair of the future. Karshish, though sceptical by temperament, had a more open mind, and, according to his opportunity, did his best to investigate the claims of Christ; and he closed his letter with a note of interrogation that might be a prelude to ultimate conviction, and that was not, at any rate, blank incredulity.

The poem is another example of Browning's amazing capacity for getting inside the minds of the most diverse characters and revealing

to us their methods of thought and their outlook upon the world. In this epistle he performs a double feat. He first discloses the character and mental life of a wandering Arab physician who lived at the beginning of the Christian era, and then he reveals a realistic picture of the intellectual and spiritual life of Lazarus after he had been raised from the dead. He shows him to us, not as the poet himself would have imagined him, but as he thought he would appear to the Arab physician. The consistency with which this double reflection is carried out is a remarkable psychological achievement. We see Karshish clearly, and we see Lazarus through his eyes.

Another stroke of genius is the way in which Browning conveys to us the impression of awe which was left upon the mind of Karshish as the result of his meeting with a man who dwelt so largely in the spirit-world. And finally he shows with consummate skill that the life lived in the clear light of unclouded revelation, where faith is lost in sight, is out of harmony with the conditions of man's present probation. From all these points of view the poem is deeply interesting.

The characters sketched or indicated in the epistle are first and foremost Karshish him-

self, the writer of the letter, "the vagrant Scholar." Behind him we see Abib, his teacher and "his Sage at home." And behind them both there is a weird figure dimly adumbrated, the old magician who dwelt by himself in the pyramid, with his occult learning and his scroll of magic spells. Fronting Karshish is the figure of Lazarus, with the strange light shining in his eyes. Around him are the village elders of Bethany, and beyond him, seen only by the reflection in his eyes, is the Nazarene Healer who raised him from the dead.

Karshish had been wandering through Palestine in search of interesting cases of disease, new methods of cure, and such *materia medica* as he could find in the land. At the end of each stage of his journey he had written to communicate the result of his investigations to his learned friend and master at home. This is the twenty-second letter of the series. In the opening lines he describes himself as—

"Karshish, the picker-up of learning's crumbs,
The not-incurious in God's handiwork
(This man's-flesh He hath admirably made,
Blown like a bubble, kneaded like a paste,
To coop up and keep down on earth a space
That puff of vapour from His mouth, man's soul)."

There is manifest at once the contrast between the view of Cleon and that of Karshish. It is the whole difference between the Occident and the Orient. Though at the head of the poem *Cleon* stands the line, "We also are his offspring," the relationship between God and man is conceived in a wholly different way by the Greek philosopher from that in which it is regarded by the Eastern sage. Karshish holds that the soul of man is the breath of God, that the body imprisons it for a little while, and when the body fails and death supervenes, the spirit slips back to the God who gave it. The task of the physician, of Abib and himself, and of their brother practitioners in the healing art, was to stop those pricks and cracks in the flesh through which otherwise the living spirit would escape from its earthly tenement.

We see, then, that Karshish was assured beforehand of the immortality of the soul. It is doubtful, however, whether he believed in a *personal* immortality. The soul of man was the breath of God, and at death it returned to Him from whom it came. It could not be annihilated, but it might be reabsorbed into the Deity. Death did not mean the end of

existence, but it probably meant the extinction of individuality.

With his greetings to Abib, Karshish also sent some specimens of those stones reputed in the East to have the power of curing snake-bites; one of them, however, in his opinion, was better fitted for charms than drugs.

He then recounted some of the perils and difficulties that he had encountered since he left Jericho, whence his last letter was written. The rough roads and toilsome journeying up the pass had cost him sweat enough, and many a scar. He depicted the disturbance and excitement of the people of the district in consequence of the reports of the Roman advance upon Jerusalem (the date of the letter is fixed by this reference). He told how, as he toiled on his way—

“A black lynx snarled and pricked a tufted ear;
Lust of my blood inflamed his yellow balls:
I cried and threw my staff and he was gone.”

He related how, like that other traveller along the selfsame road referred to in the Gospel, he fell among thieves; how he was once mistaken for a spy; but at last, in spite of everything, he had reached the neighbourhood of Jerusalem; for Bethany, where he was

lodging, was less than two miles distant from the city.

With the grim and ponderous humour of the sage he described it as "scarce the distance thence a man, with plague-sores at the third degree, runs, till he drops down dead." He then proceeded to record some of his medical observations for the benefit of his master—a symptom in tertian fever, a cure for epilepsy, and some mottled curious spiders that weave no web and which might be used medicinally in a way that he was about to describe—when his cautious instinct warned him not to entrust professional secrets to so risky a messenger as the man who had undertaken to convey his letter.

His courier was a patient who suffered from one of those diseases of the eye so common in the East, and whose distress Karshish had alleviated by blowing a sublimate up his nose. Rather than trust to his doubtful service, he determined to wait until he got to Jerusalem before committing to writing the details of his discoveries. One or two things, however, he thought he might safely add: a note as to the superior quality of the gum-tragacanth of Judea, and a reference to the difficulty of discriminating between scalp disease and leprosy.

And with that he made as if to end his letter. Yet all the while he had never mentioned the one subject that absorbed his thoughts, and was the real motive that prompted him to write.

Whilst he was irresolute whether to proceed with the letter or make an end of writing, his Syrian messenger turned the scale by protesting his gratitude and fidelity. Karshish determined to commit to writing the story of the strange bewilderment that had overcome him. And yet he hardly knew how to put it down in cold black and white. He was at once anxious to communicate his experience and at the same time bashful and ashamed of his emotion. He determined to relate the story, but to do so with assumed indifference and scientific detachment. He spoke of it as a trifle which the messenger might steal if he pleased without any harm. It was probably, he suggested, the little town's barrenness of interest that had made him attach undue importance to a trivial matter. In any case, if he was to record it at all, he had better do so at once while it was fresh in his mind. When he was engaged upon more important matters he would probably have forgotten it. In fact, he confessed, the man whose case had so impressed him had only just left him.

Thus, with many apologies, and with an elaborate and unsuccessful attempt to assume indifference, he introduced to Abib the case of Lazarus—a man who professed to have been raised from the dead. He began, in studiously cold scientific terms, to suggest a simple and natural medical explanation of the case. The man, he submitted, was probably an epileptic. One of his seizures had taken the form of a long, deathlike trance (catalepsy rather than epilepsy). For some three days he had been in this condition, when by some means, either by a drug, or spell, or exorcist's art of some kind—Karshish would like to know the secret of it—he had been restored to consciousness and fulness of physical health. But it was found that he had been left the victim of a monomania.

It had probably happened on this wise. The return to consciousness had been made too suddenly. The man's mind was absolutely empty and blank when he recovered, and the first suggestion that came to him had so impressed itself upon his vacant brain that it had become a fixed idea which nothing thereafter could ever alter or remove. And the first obsession that dominated the awakening intellect was the idea that he had really

been dead, and had been raised to life again by the Nazarene Physician who wrought his cure. That had become his firmest conviction.

Such was the diagnosis of the case which the physician's scientific intellect and lifelong habits of thought compelled him to make. But in his effort to eliminate the supernatural he felt that he had succeeded too well. He had made the case look commonplace. Abib would ask, What was there unusual or noteworthy in this? So he proceeded to justify his interest by dwelling upon some of the remarkable features of the case.

In the first place he emphasized the permanence of this fixed idea. Such morbid suggestions were usually dispelled by returning health and strength, but in this case it had permeated his whole life. And whether the man's mind was morbid or not, his body was certainly uncommonly healthy. Indeed, at the age of fifty years he was such a type of vigorous manhood that he was worthy to be put on show. And in all the science known to Karshish and his friend there was certainly no drug capable of putting a man into a three days' sleep from which he would awake with his youth renewed.

Then, further, the man's mental outlook

was, to say the least of it, extraordinary. In some things he was like a child. For example, the village elders of Bethany brought him into the room for Karshish to examine him and investigate the case. They spoke of him sometimes angrily, sometimes sorrowfully, but he seemed quite indifferent to all they said. He folded his hands, and seemed far more interested in the flies buzzing about the room than in all the excitement of his friends. And yet when the physician questioned him he proved no fool. Karshish was at a loss to know how to explain his attitude. He compared him to a man who had been in poverty all his days until middle life, and who had then suddenly become possessed of wealth. How would such an one comport himself? Why, he would not know how to use his money. He would practise absurd economy in some things and wild extravagance in others. At one time he would be dominated by his old habits; at another he would be carried to the opposite extreme by the new consciousness of wealth.

Lazarus was, in some way, like that beggar, only in his case the new-found treasure was knowledge. He seemed like a man who had got more knowledge than he knew how to

use. In fact, wrote Karshish, forgetting for the moment his professional scepticism, he seemed like a man who was spiritually in heaven whilst he was physically upon earth : a man who saw heavenly visions and yet was compelled to live an earthly life. And the result was that he had lost all sense of proportion. He ceased to acknowledge the common standard of values recognized among men, and hence his life seemed somehow thrown out of gear. Things that men esteem as great seemed to him as trifles, whilst those affairs that men regard as trifling assumed in his eyes portentous significance.

For example, the gigantic military force with which Rome was preparing to overthrow Jerusalem was a matter of tremendous import to every Jew. The news overshadowed every other topic of conversation. Men could think and speak of scarcely anything else. They were watching the great drama with breathless apprehension. But to Lazarus all this was of no more moment than the passing of a mule with gourds. On the other hand, the mention of some little commonplace matter would fill him with wonder and gasping amazement, and he seemed bewildered because he could not make other people share his feelings.

If his little child fell ill and seemed likely to die, you would expect that all his parental love would show itself in tense anxiety, that he would be too much alarmed and distressed to attend to his work; but no—his face would be as cheerful as ever and he would ply his trade as if the angel of Death never threatened his house. Yet that did not mean that he was selfish or indifferent to his child's welfare. He would watch it with tender solicitude. If by some casual word or slight gesture the child showed signs of deceit, of passion, of waywardness, he would start in affright and terror. He would be beside himself with alarm. If an onlooker sought to appease him and suggested that it was a slight matter and unworthy of so much distress and disturbance, he would regard him with a look of exasperation and alarm, of pity for his ignorance and concern for his danger.

As the old magician who lived alone in the pyramid used to regard Karshish and Abib, when as children they rashly began to recite spells of whose terrific import they knew nothing—spells of potency sufficient to shatter the framework of the universe—so Lazarus regarded a child that trifled with wrongdoing and a man who treated such trifling with

levity. In his eyes it was playing with Greek fire, toying with that dynamite the explosion of which would reduce the moral cosmos to a chaos, and lead to anarchy and awful ruin. That was how a man who had once been for a while in heaven regarded even the slightest act of sin. It seemed that Lazarus was dwelling in two worlds at once, worlds that were governed by two sets of laws.

The earthly life which he was compelled to lead "ran like a thread across some vast distracting orb of glory." He was conscious that, though on earth, he was on every side ensphered by heaven; and the blinding radiance of that other world so dazzled him that he could hardly order his steps aright on plain, prosaic earth. The glory allured him, and yet forbade him to enter its precincts. And that which bewildered him most was the clashing of the moral laws which reigned in the two worlds. There the law of right was absolute, clear and unconditioned. Here it was relative, seemingly uncertain and often conditioned by circumstances.

"It should be "balked by" here it cannot be."

There were times when he seemed to forget the earthly limitations, and he sprang, as it

were, for a moment into the spiritual world, where he saw again his Healer's face, and heard once more the command to rise; and he fain would rise again. As once before he rose from the tomb to the life of men, so now he longed to rise from this life, which seemed like death to him, into that fuller, freer life he knew beyond.

Then some reminder would bring him back to earth again, the light would die out of his face, and he would stoop once more to his craftsmanship and ply his trade. After such moments of uplifting his abasement would be the more profound, because his spiritual insight made him more conscious of his faults. He viewed himself and the world from the standpoint of heaven rather than from that of earth, and the result was a wonderful spirit of submission to the Divine Will—a kind of Christian fatalism which characterized his whole life. He was waiting patiently for death, which appeared to him as a veritable gate of life, because it was the only means by which the balance could be restored to his disturbed nature.

His death years before had released the soul from the body, and during that brief period, before the Master recalled his spirit, it had

grown and developed in a more congenial clime, so that on its return it had become too great, so to speak, for its earthly dwelling: much as if a butterfly, emerging from the chrysalis form, and fluttering awhile in the air, had been compelled to fold its wings and creep back into the narrow cell from which it came. So Lazarus looked forward to death as a release for the folded and pent-up wings of his soul. Yet in this as in other things he was perfectly content to submit to the will of God.

He was willing and was glad to live as long as God pleased. His only desire was to do God's will, in God's time and in God's way. So complete was his reliance on God's wisdom that he was not feverishly anxious to make converts to his faith. "The truth is great and will prevail," seemed to be the maxim on which he acted. His own faith was based upon grounds that he could not impart to another, and he was no preacher. If his faith were attacked by an unbeliever he remained serene and untroubled, trusting still in the will of God.

Karshish himself had sought to try him by upbraiding him for his want of patriotism, his indifference to the Roman advance on Jerusalem, but Lazarus only gazed dreamily

at his tormentor. Was he then merely apathetic? By no means, Karshish declared. He was a man of deep and wide affections. He loved old and young, weak and strong. Like Francis of Assisi in later days, he cared even for the birds and brutes. The very flowers of the field were dear to him.

His only perceptible fault was an angry impatience, which he could not always restrain, at ignorance and carelessness and sin. That Karshish could well understand. He himself when on his travels had sometimes pretended ignorance of the healing art for some purpose of his own, and had been irritated, beyond endurance almost, by hearing some ignoramus air his views on medicine with an air of profound wisdom. So, he thought, Lazarus, with his heavenly knowledge of what sin meant and what were its consequences, could ill endure the babbling of fools on sacred themes.

But if the case of this man was of such interest, why did not Karshish seek out the Nazarene Healer himself and inquire into it? So he imagined Abib would ask. That, alas! had been impossible, for this wonderful physician had been put to death many years before by the foolish populace. In fact, he was killed just about the time of the great

earthquake that Karshish and Abib had cause to remember, because it proved to be an omen of the death or disappearance of their teacher, the great wizard who lived alone in the pyramid. It was about that time that this Nazarene was slain.

The reasons for which the mob murdered Him had been variously reported: that He was a wizard, or a rebel, or that He proclaimed some extraordinary creed, announcing a new kingdom—such were the stories. Probably, Karshish thought, the fact was that the people had besought Him to stop the earthquake, and when they found that he couldn't do it they put Him to death. That was most likely. Other reasons had also been given, but they were altogether incredible.

One, indeed, stated by Lazarus himself as the real cause of the Nazarene's murder, was so extraordinary, so blasphemous even, that Karshish scarcely liked to repeat it to Abib. Still, bearing in mind that Lazarus was stark mad, and quite unaccountable for what he said, perhaps it was as well to report it, as it might throw some light upon his patient's condition of mind. And thus, with many apologies and much show of reluctance, Karshish set down the great revelation that had

evidently dominated his thought ever since he had met with Lazarus. This, then, was the alleged reason for the execution of the Nazarene—that he proclaimed Himself to be the very God who dwelt awhile in mortal flesh upon the earth, and then died and passed to heaven again.

“This man so cured regards the curer, then,
As—God forgive me ! who but God Himself,
Creator and Sustainer of the world,
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile !
—’Sayeth that such an one was born and lived,
Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his own
house,
Then died with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was—what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
In hearing of this very Lazarus.”

Then Karshish, having set down the wondrous statement, tried to evade its significance, as one fascinated by it and yet afraid of all it might involve. He pretended to discount its importance, to treat it as the wild utterance of an irresponsible madman, and to resume his air of philosophic calm, which, indeed, he had forgotten and abandoned during his description of the case.

He tried with evident effort to go back to his scientific discoveries. He made a note about the nitrous quality of blue-flowering

borage, but it was clearly impossible for him to concentrate his attention on any subject other than that which had so impressed his imagination. And so, in closing his letter, he made one more attempt to explain the interest and awe with which he regarded Lazarus. His first meeting with the man had been under circumstances calculated to work upon the imagination. He was tired out with his journey from Jericho, and in a peculiarly impressionable mood. It was the evening hour.

“ . . . I met him thus :

I crossed a ridge of short sharp broken hills
Like an old lion's cheek teeth. Out there came
A moon made like a face with certain spots
Multiform, manifold and menacing :
Then a wind rose behind me. So we met
In this old sleepy town at unaware,
The man and I.”

In this vivid picture of a weird, unearthly landscape, rendered ghostly by the waning twilight, the half-human face of the rising moon, the murmuring cadences of the melancholy wind, he sought an explanation of his own mood, and by that mood he tried to account for the supernatural impression that Lazarus had made upon him.

With a further apology he closed his letter,

professing indifference as to whether it reached its destination or not. And yet the wonderful suggestion that came to him through his interview with Lazarus had so gripped him that even yet he could not shake it off. In an impulsive postscript he at last transcribed the thought that all the while had been struggling to find expression—the revelation of an incarnate God, whose love was as great as His power, who gave Himself to die for man, and who waited yet to reveal Himself to loyal, loving hearts.

“The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too—
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, ‘O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, My hands fashioned, see it in Myself!
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,
But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,
And thou must love Me who have died for thee!’
The madman saith He said so: it is strange.”

Thus the heart of the man cries out, breaking through the stilted phraseology of the physician, and the light of Christ, reflected from the eyes of Lazarus, shines into the heart of this groping seeker after truth.

CHAPTER X

A SAINT'S LAST TESTAMENT

The Full Light of Gospel Day.

IN the poem entitled *A Death in the Desert* we reach the climax of that little series of studies in which we see portrayed man's search after and apprehension of God. In *Caliban* we watched the first dim groping of a half-awakened soul after some higher power vaguely apprehended and grotesquely conceived. In *Cleon* we heard the voice of Greek culture and philosophy crying out for a fuller satisfaction than the beauties of earth or the joys of art can give. In *Karshish* we beheld the wonder-light shining in the eyes of one who had seen a reflection of the face of Christ mirrored in the soul of a disciple. Now, in the poem that forms the subject of this chapter, we are brought face to face with "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and we hear from his lips his testimony to the power of the love and light that shone into the world through the coming of Christ.

A Death in the Desert is a poem not altogether easy of interpretation. The argument is subtle, and the connection between the different parts is sometimes difficult to trace. Both the nature of the theme and the form in which it is presented add to the difficulties in the way of clear apprehension. But the background of the story is vividly portrayed and the incident is graphically narrated.

The poem is a translation of an imaginary document which relates the dying testimony of St. John and describes the circumstances of his death. It tells how in his last interval of consciousness he fell into a prophetic trance in which he heard and answered the doubts and questionings of men in coming generations, and vindicated the methods of Divine revelation against the cavillers and sceptics of later ages. His defence is based on broad principles which are founded upon the nature and limitations of human knowledge, the educative value of doubt and difficulty, and the true character of religious faith.

It has been made a ground of objection to the poem that whilst John is supposed to have anticipated the criticism of later days, he fails to answer in detail the various points of attack made by the critics of the nineteenth

century upon the Gospel records. But it would surely have been preposterously out of place to put into the mouth of a first-century saint, even though he spoke in a prophetic trance, arguments concerned with details of textual criticism. Assuming the point of view which Browning ascribes to St. John, it is difficult to see how he could have taken any other line of argument than one based upon general principles.

Prefixed to the imaginary Greek manuscript, of which the poem is supposed to be a translation, is an explanatory and descriptive note by an anonymous scribe, who signs with his initials and a cross, in token of his faith. He ascribes the writing to one Pamphylax, a native of Antioch, and states that he received it from Xanthus, his wife's uncle.

Then begins the description of the death-scene of St. John. The dying saint was stretched on the floor of a cave somewhere in the deserts of Asia Minor, not far from Ephesus. The time is about the end of the first century, probably during the reign of Trajan. The persecution that relaxed on the death of the Emperor Domitian seems to have broken out afresh. Five faithful disciples

had borne the body of the unconscious apostle away into this remote hiding-place, in order that his last hours might be unmolested.

The cave in which he was lying consisted of three chambers leading one out of the other. The innermost, where they had been hiding hitherto, was quite dark, and now, as they felt that the end drew near, they had carried him into the middle chamber where the noontide light was dimly diffused, so that they might watch "the last of what might happen on his face." Around him were grouped Pamphylax, Xanthus, Valens and a boy-disciple; whilst outside the cave, in the full glare of the sun, stood a Bactrian convert, "a wild, childish man who could not write or speak, but only loved." He—

"Kept watch, and made pretence to graze a goat
That gave us milk, on rags of various herb,
Plantain and quitch, the rocks' shade keeps alive :
So that if any thief or soldier passed,
(Because the persecution was aware)
Yielding the goat up promptly with his life,
Such man might pass on, joyful at a prize,
Nor care to pry into the cool o' the cave.
Outside was all noon and the burning blue."

Inside the cave the devoted disciples were endeavouring to call their teacher back to consciousness, hoping to hear some last words from him before he died. They moistened

his lips with wine. They laid a cold, wet linen rag on his forehead. They chafed his hands. Then Valens brought a ball of fragrant nard and brake it, so that its restorative odour might haply recall the fleeting soul. But all that their efforts achieved was to make him turn—

“And smile a little, as a sleeper does
If any dear one call him, touch his face—
And smiles and loves, but will not be disturbed.”

One of them prayed over him, but still he woke not. Then the boy-disciple, “stung by the splendour of a sudden thought,” ran and brought a copy of John’s Gospel graven in lead, and feeling with his finger for the passage he sought, read out in the tone of one announcing a new faith, the great words, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” That familiar proclamation reached and recalled the slumbering soul of the aged Apostle. Amidst an intense stillness, broken only by the cry of the Bactrian outside the cave, imitating the call of a bird as a signal that all was safe, St. John sat up and looked around.

At first he was confused and bewildered. The past was vivid and clear to him, the present seemed like a dream. He could almost fancy for the moment that his past

life was externalized and presented as a drama before him. The figures of Valens and Xanthus represented James and Peter, whilst the young lad stood for John himself, as he was in earlier days. But this he knew was fancy, for, though his bodily senses were well-nigh lost, he still felt himself to be alive and in his fleshly tabernacle. So he bade the watchers be still whilst he collected himself.

Then follows a note in which the scribe explains John's doctrine of the tripartite nature of man: namely, that man consists of (i) an active soul residing in the body and holding communion with the world. This passes up and is merged into (ii) an intellectual soul having its seat in the brain and combining in itself the faculties of feeling, thinking and willing. And this again tends upward and grows into (iii) the highest soul, the spiritual nature of man in which is found the shrine of individual personality, and which at its highest point holds and is upheld by God.

"What Does, what Knows, what Is : three souls,
one man."

Such, says the manuscript, was the teaching of John, according to the interpretation of one Theotypas.

Then again John roused himself from his reverie and spoke. He compared himself to a burnt stick at the end of which is left a spark of fire. Yet if a man blows upon the spark, it runs back through the ashes, kindling once more a semblance of life ere it dies out altogether. So by a last effort his soul had come back and quickened for a while his worn-out brain. He saw and recognized the disciples around him, and remembered that James and Peter died long ago, and that he alone was left of the band of witnesses who could testify to the words and deeds of Jesus Christ.

Yet with him it was more than memory, the truth was real and present in his experience. As he once saw the visions of Patmos, even now it was possible that he might see the glorified Lord once more. The fact that he was yet alive was a token that there was still some opportunity of service for him. Through him in some way Christ would yet reveal His love to men. When he died there would be left on earth no one who—

“Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands
That which was from the first, the Word of Life.
How will it be when none more saith, ‘I saw’?”

He recalled the course of his past ministry, how at first, and for many years, he wandered

through the world teaching man, and bearing his testimony by word of mouth; then in the silence and seclusion of his banishment on Patmos a new avenue of teaching was opened to him, and, acting on Divine prompting, he wrote his message to the world. And by each kind of teaching he won man's assent and obedience to the truth. Then love became more and more the key-note of his teaching—

“Men should, for love's sake, in love's strength believe.”

Then at last, as a jelly-fish, stranded on the shore, testifies to the wonders of the waves that rolled over the beach when the tide was high, so John in the weakness of old age was left as a living witness of the great days of power and wonder when the Incarnate Lord dwelt among men. And, though anti-Christ's sprang up and sceptics assailed his faith, he continued his work with unruffled calm, telling again and again the old story. As he told and retold the incidents of the life of Christ they began to shine with new significance in his own eyes. He saw more of the spiritual truth enshrined in material fact.

“What first were guessed as points, I now knew stars.”

Then with this new light shining upon the old facts he wrote his Gospel, that he might reveal to men the inner significance of the life of Christ. And then the end had come, as he believed. He fell sick and lapsed from consciousness, and his faithful disciples had brought him to this cave to die. Now, recalled for a brief while to the world of men, he felt himself borne in spirit down the stream of the ages, and found himself listening to the voices of the men of coming generations, hearing their doubts and fears and questionings, in order that he might answer them in anticipation before he died.

What, then, were these difficulties that would be raised by the doubters in the centuries to come? They would ask what assurance they had that his Gospel was not a forgery. They would question the very fact of John's existence. They would demand to know his credentials as a witness of that life that he alleged had been lived amongst men. How should he answer them? He might say to them that the credentials of the Gospel need not be sought in the records of the past, for they were to be found in the life of the present. They might know that Christ was, because they had evidence that

He is. So at least it seemed to him, who was so near the eternal world that the light of God shone through the earthly veil now worn so thin.

“To me, that story—ay, that Life and Death
Of which I wrote, ‘it was’—to me, it is;
—Is, here and now: I apprehend nought else.
Is not God now i’ the world His power first made?
Is not His love at issue still with sin,
Visibly when a wrong is done on earth?”

But though such proof sufficed for him it might not serve for those whose spiritual vision was darkened by the veil of flesh. They needed something concrete and material, some plain statement of definite historic fact, before they could realize the love and mercy of God that bathed them like the atmosphere they breathed.

As an optic-lens reveals the details of that which else would seem confused and blurred by its very nearness to the unassisted eye, so the life and death of Christ objectified and visualized the love of God. Placed in its historic setting they could stand before it and contemplate it, and by its means they would come to realize that Incarnation and Atonement that was ever present and at work in the world of men. Through the revelation of the historic Jesus they should attain to

the consciousness of the ever-present Christ. The love of Jesus would teach them that God is love.

“For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,
And hope and fear . . .
Is just our chance o’ the prize of learning love,
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is.”

But for the apprehension of love thus revealed to us some degree of spiritual insight is needed. It is not a fact that can be understood and proved like the facts of the physical world. As John looked forward to the future he saw that material benefits, once gained, would be held by mankind for ever; but it would not be so with spiritual truth. Each generation would have to fight its own battles, to solve its own problems.

When men had, for example, once learned how to kindle fire and had realized the warmth and comfort that it brings, they would never again need to learn that lesson, they would never fail to appreciate that boon. But the revelation of God in Christ needed to be apprehended afresh by each new generation, nay, even by each soul in turn. For if this fact became the assured heritage of the race, heartily accepted and fully believed like the fact of the warmth of the fire, then, doubt

being for ever silenced, man's probation would cease and his moral progress would come to an end.

This is a favourite thesis with Browning, that by means of the stress of conflict with doubt, man grows in soul.

"While were it so with the soul,—this gift of truth
Once grasped, were this our soul's gain safe, and sure
To prosper as the body's gain is wont,—
Why, man's probation would conclude, his earth
Crumble; for he both reasons and decides,
Weighs first, then chooses: will he give up fire
For gold or purple, once he knows its worth?
Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire."

Then John seemed to hear from the far-off generations the murmuring of those men who looked back with longing to the age of faith. They would imagine that it must have been easier to believe in the early days when proof was plain and the historic scenes were visibly enacted before men's eyes. John's answer was to point to his own case. He had held companionship with Jesus, had listened to His words and seen His miracles. Yet he had forsaken his Lord at the moment of His arrest, terrified by the sight of "the sudden

Roman faces " in the torchlight and by the fear of the Jews.

It was possible for man's faith to fail even when he had held companionship with the Incarnate Word. Yet a short space afterwards women and children, strong in the faith, perished at the stake rather than deny the Lord whom they had never seen. Faith was not dependent upon sight for its victory. But even the age of the martyrs had its own peculiar perils and temptations. New heresies sprang up which tested man's loyalty as severely as John's had been tried by the Roman spear. Then to help men in their doubts and perplexities, to assist their faith, John wrote his Gospel. And still from future ages came the cry—

"Was John at all, and did he say he saw?

Assure us, ere we ask what he might see!"

He longed to help men in their difficulties, and he felt that the very failure of his own faith in by-gone days qualified him to be a helper of those whose faith was shaken. If a child had been born and had grown up inside the dark cave in which they were living; if it had always dwelt in this dim half-light and never seen the sun, it would be much easier for one who himself had been

born in such conditions, and had afterwards seen the sun, to teach the child what sunlight was, than for one who had never dwelt in the deprivation and darkness of the cave. So John would fain use the memory of his former failure to send a message of cheer down the centuries to the despondent and doubting hearts of coming days. With prophetic foresight he anticipated the changes of the after years.

He saw men dwelling on islands as yet undiscovered, crowding in the giant cities that would spring up in what then were wastes, wandering over the doubtful ruins of what in his day were great cities; and on all faces he saw the shadow cast by doubt; in their tones he heard the wistful cadence of troubled questioning, and his heart went out in longing to help them in their need. "Was God," they seemed to ask, "ever incarnate among men? Did He ever reveal Himself as Power, as Love, as Spiritual Influence?"

John was anxious to hear more clearly the exact nature of their difficulty that he might answer it.

"Quick, for time presses, tell the whole mind out,
And let us ask and answer and be saved!"

In the lines which follow the doubt which

has hitherto been but vaguely indicated is stated somewhat more clearly. In substance it is this: men reading John's Gospel would see in it a narrative of certain wonderful facts of a miraculous character, and those incidents, purporting to be a life of Christ, would portray Him as One exercising Divine Power and moved by Divine Love.

The latter-day sceptic would decline to accept as historic the narrative of incidents; the lapse of time would have rendered them incapable of proof. What, then, became of this portrait of Power and Love? Did it not carry its own credentials with it? Would not the fact that it so exactly answered man's needs be a proof of its Divine origin? "By no means," the sceptic would answer. The fact that we can apprehend the love of Christ proves that we have the power of love in ourselves. And if we have this power, what is more likely than that men in the past projected and idealized it, and so created the fancy of the All-loving One?

And so with the Power. The Divine Will was but the reflection of the Human Will magnified and glorified. So the heathen in olden days depicted their gods as built up out of human attributes: and so the early

Christians must have created the conception of Christ by idealizing the love and power that they found existent in themselves. If otherwise, why were not miracles such as those recorded in the past available to help faith to-day?

Then John took his challenged Gospel in his hands and summoned up his remaining strength to repel this anticipated attack on the Christian truth. And first he answered the question why miracles had ceased from the Christian Church. The value of a miracle was, he said, to testify to the validity of a doctrine which otherwise would not be able rightfully to claim man's allegiance. When seeds are sown in the earth, twigs are planted in the soil to indicate the position and the character of the hidden germs. But when, from the seeds, the plants have sprung and grown and borne fruit, they testify to themselves, and the twigs are discarded as useless. So when Christian truth was first sown in the world, it was attested by miraculous signs; but when in later days it had sprung up and borne fruit in the lives of men, miracles became superfluous and were discarded like the useless twigs in the garden. The lesson once taught needed not to be

repeated. That was an answer on the lowest ground.

But there was a higher reason. A nurse would compel an infant to take food whether it would or not. But when that infant was grown to years of discretion, and knew the value of food, he was left to feed himself. In the infancy of the Church miracles in a manner compelled faith, but in later days faith, to be worthy of the name, must be voluntary, not compulsory. In Christianity God offered men the satisfaction of their deepest needs, the solution of their most urgent problems. He left it to men to accept His offer or reject it. He would not force it upon them.

“I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.”

Browning's view of Christian faith seems to be : (i) that it is not the intellectual acceptance of that which is demonstrated to the reason as necessarily true. Such assent is compulsory, non-moral, and has no educative effect on the soul ; (ii) neither is it the acceptance of that which is inconceivable, self-contradictory, or repugnant to reason. That

would mean the abnegation or stultification of the powers with which man is endowed; (iii) but it is the deliberate acceptance of that which, though it is incapable of actual proof, nevertheless commends itself to man's moral nature, is supported by a balance of probabilities, and which, when taken as a working hypothesis, justifies itself by its results.

This is what he seems to claim for the Christian revelation, and this is what John here urges upon men of coming generations. He feels that there is a danger lest the Christian religion may be rejected on account of its very adequacy to meet man's need. Just as a lamp may refuse to burn because it is overcharged with oil; just as the stomach may starve if it is overloaded with food, so men may make that which ought to be an evidence of the truth of Christianity the very ground of their objections and scepticism. When men sought to look behind the powers of Nature in search of a directing mind and creative intelligence, God in His written word gave them the revelation which they sought. But if, when through the progress of science, God disclosed more and more of the effects of His active Will, men make that very disclosure the ground for denying an active Will

altogether, and say that it is nothing but blind force, then they make the revelation of none effect. For God has shown them in their own nature that Will lies behind power; and men who deny the existence of Will are doing violence to their own nature, and are in effect committing spiritual suicide.

Again, when men looked wistfully behind the revelation of an Active Will for some evidence of a Loving Heart, God answered this need in the gift of Jesus Christ. But when men reject Christ, because He so perfectly meets their needs, when they say that because men feel their need of Incarnate Love to respond to the love in their own hearts, therefore Christ is but the projection and idealization of what man has found in himself, then God has no further word to say. That which should be evidence of the truth is once more made the ground of its rejection.

“How shall ye help this man who knows himself,
That he must love and would be loved again,
Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,
Rejecteth Christ through very need of Him?
The lamp o'erswims with oil, the stomach flags
Loaded with nurture, and that man's soul dies.”

The final reach of the argument does undoubtedly present some difficulty to the reader. It seems, indeed, at first sight to

give away the whole position, and the final interpretation of it must depend very much upon the personal bias of the interpreter. Reading it, however, in the light of the whole poem, and acknowledging that even then some seeming inconsistencies remain, the following is, perhaps, a fair paraphrase of its meaning.

The sceptics of later times have one more criticism to offer. If the purpose of the life and death of Jesus was to reveal to men the truth as to the nature of God, and His attitude towards His creatures, why was not that final truth so disclosed as to make it independent of definite incidents in human history, incidents concerning which the scientific criticism of later days has left us in doubt? We cannot now be certain whether the earthly life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel story is fact or fable, and in consequence we have no assurance that His revelation of God is trustworthy. Why not have given us the absolute truth at once in detachment from all historic narrative? Why insist upon our accepting a revelation, which, from its embodiment in a story of places, names and dates, must necessarily be relative and partial?

John's answer is a defence of a relative

revelation as against a declaration of final and absolute truth. From the very nature of the case he cannot reply to the challenge of the higher criticism. He has already declared the authenticity and historicity of his Gospel, and no further categorical declarations of the fact could possibly carry authority across the intervening centuries. All that remains to him is to show why Divine truth should be embodied in human narratives, and thus exposed to the risk of error which is inherent in all things human.

He finds the ground of his argument in the constitution of human nature. Human knowledge is from its very nature progressive. This must be so unless man claims for himself the supreme place in the universe. If he denies that there is any love behind the forces of Nature, if he recognizes nothing outside of himself except might and will,—then if he have but the faintest spark of love in his heart he is enthroned above that non-loving force that made the world. He is become God in fact. If, however, he is not prepared to make this claim, if he recognizes in the universe One higher than himself, if he finds his place somewhere betwixt the beasts and God,—then he must acknowledge his life to be a

progression. The beasts are perfect—in their limited way. God is perfect—in His unlimited nature. Man alone is imperfect, striving upwards, passing from knowledge which is relative and partial, to that which is more complete, aiming at the absolute, yet not attaining fully.

“Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.”

Then a revelation of Divine truth, if it is to meet his needs, must be partial and relative, conditioned by the limitations of human life and circumstances, enshrined in a narrative which admits of possibilities of error. From such a revelation the ultimate truth will gradually shine out, the spiritual meaning will develop from the material facts. The things that are seen and temporal will shadow forth that which is unseen and eternal. As the statuary beholds his ideal in the clay before he has bodied it forth, and then gradually moulds the real into the likeness of the image in his brain, so, from the imperfect embodiment of the relative and partial, man shall see gradually emerging, the perfect, the final, the absolute truth. To refuse, then, a partial revelation, which is conditioned to meet our needs, is to lose the ultimate truth

of heaven, "where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing."

With this last answer John had made his final effort. Though he was willing, if need be, to live another hundred years, in order to help his struggling brothers, God did not require it of him. His work was done, and about noon he died. The disciples buried him, and, scattering, went their several ways.

The writer of the manuscript declares that he has committed the narrative to writing on the eve of his martyrdom in order that men may know the truth, and to correct the mistaken belief that John was gifted with earthly immortality.

"For all was as I say, and now the man
Lies as he lay once, breast to breast with God."

A final note in brackets concludes the poem. It describes the heretic Cerinthus reading the manuscript and musing upon it. Then an unknown scribe had added his refutation of the heresy of Cerinthus. If Christ was only man, as the heretic declared, He must be of all men most wretched. For His life's ambition had been to unite with Himself the souls of those who loved Him. And now, since His death, many had believed in Him, and ere the world ended, which would happen

in about ten or twelve years, the scribe supposed, very many more would have turned to Him. It was impossible that a mere man should grow incorporate with each one of all these hundreds of souls.

“Yet Christ saith, this He lived and died to do.
Call Christ, then, the illimitable God,
Or lost !”

“But,” adds the manuscript grimly, “’twas Cerinthus that is lost.”

CHAPTER XI

THE WARRIOR'S LAST FIGHT

"The Mystery of Death"

IN order to give some kind of completeness to this series of little studies it is needful to consider, though it may be very briefly and imperfectly, Browning's attitude towards that last great problem, the mystery of Death. How did he face it? In what way did he regard it? How does he teach us to think of it? It seems as if the last great mystery were set at the end of life as the final test of a man's moral worth. How did Browning stand that test?

Some writers have approached the problem as sentimentalists. They, as a rule, have much to say about the matter. They view death as a pathetic thing. They would have us sigh over the thought of it. They would wring tears from us by depicting it. They represent it as a drooping, a fading, a passing out. To them it means life cut short, hopes unfulfilled, purposes unachieved. Thus

regarded it is an enervating thought. The prospect robs life of much of its value. It scarcely seems worth while to attempt much if, so often, that which is attempted must be laid down unfinished.

It scarcely needs to be said that this sentimental view of death is removed as far as possible from Browning's own attitude. Yet with his deep knowledge of the human heart, and his all-embracing catholic sympathy, he understood it and depicted it. That view, or something very like it, is represented in the little poem called *A Toccata of Galuppi's*. Baldassaro Galuppi was a Venetian composer and musician of the eighteenth century. The poem expresses the impression produced by playing over or hearing a *toccata* (a light and graceful touch-piece) with which he had once delighted the ball-rooms of Venice in the long-past years.

An untravelled Englishman listening to it seems to see in imagination the scenes amidst which it was composed. He has a vision of the life and gaiety of the pleasure-loving men and women of Venice turning night into day with their revelry, pausing now and then, in the midst of their mirth, to listen to the music of the great master. As they listened the

music seemed to speak to them, bearing a plaintive message. It spoke of death as the end of all their gaiety, of the great silence that would follow swiftly upon their laughter, of the final darkness that would extinguish all the fairy-lamps of their summer's festival. Then the chatter and noise, the kisses and the love-making, would break out and drown Galuppi's music, until the persistent questioning of the dominant note made itself heard again; and finally an octave struck the answer. "Life is short, death is nigh; live and laugh while you may, for the end is at hand," it seemed to say.

But Venice only laughed and applauded, and left the musician in order to pursue its merry-making.

"Then they left you for their pleasure : till in due time,
one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds
as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they
never see the sun."

The music with its melancholy message rings down the years, and the listener, as he hears, shivers and feels his nerves creep. To him it sounds like the chirp of a ghostly cricket, creaking amongst the ashes of a burnt house. He begins to ask himself what all his

life, with its science and philosophy, is worth, if death must come with its stealthy footstep and plunge him into the dark.

“As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop :
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop ?
‘Dust and ashes !’ So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too,—what’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms ? I feel chilly and grown old.”

This is what the sentimentalist view of death leads to—feeling chilly and grown old.

In some respects akin to this, yet essentially very different, is the view of a man who has been brought suddenly face to face with the great mystery, whose heart is wrung by a sense of bitter loss. For the sake of distinction we may call it the emotional view of death. The first was really foreign to Browning’s character ; the second expressed a mood which came upon him, as it comes to most men, at certain crises in his life. It is the mood in which Tennyson wrote *In Memoriam*. The classic example of that view of death in Browning’s poetry is, of course, *La Saisiaz*.

As that poem, however, does not fall within the period to which we have confined ourselves, we must dismiss it with a passing mention. It shows us that Browning had himself passed through the deep waters and agonized in wrestling with the great problems that test the faith of most men when they come to stand beside an open grave.

Before passing to the consideration of that attitude which is most characteristic of Browning, we may just mention one other view which is the very antithesis of the poet's own—the coward's fear of death. There is one outstanding example of panic in the face of death in Browning's work. But as this also occurs in the later period of his writing we will do little more than refer to it.

In the story of *The Ring and the Book*, Count Guido, a monster of atrocious villainy, has murdered his wife, the child-saint Pompilia. For his crime he has been condemned to death, and during the last night before his execution he pours out a torrent of invective into the ears of some dignitaries of the Church who have come to visit him. He spends the night in blasphemy and bravado, but when, with the first light of dawn, he hears the executioner's step on the threshold and his

knock at the door, his false courage deserts him. He passes from bravado to fear, from fear to terror, and from terror to panic. He shrieks and pleads for his life—life at any price, and under any conditions. He cries for help to all the powers, earthly and heavenly, and last he calls upon the name of his poor wronged and murdered wife—

“ . . . All was folly—I laughed and mocked !
Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,
Is—save me notwithstanding ! Life is all !
I was just stark mad,—let the madman live
Pressed by as many chains as you please pile !
Don't open ! Hold me from them ! I am yours,
I am the Granduke's—no, I am the Pope's !
Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .
Pompilia, will you let them murder me ? ”

And with that shriek the coward passes out of life.

It is with a sense of relief that we pass from the consideration of Guido's cowardice to the contemplation of Browning's courage. For there is another attitude towards death which yet remains to be reviewed : the attitude of the warrior, the spirit of the man who faces the last conflict as a brave soldier enters upon his last fight. And that attitude is pre-eminently characteristic of this poet. It found its supreme expression in his poetry at two great crises of his life. The first was when the wife

whom he adored was taken from him; the second was when his own life was well-nigh ended, and he was conscious that he had reached the brink of the last river. The poems that mark his attitude at those crises are *Prospice* and the "Epilogue" to *Asolando*.

Mrs. Browning died in June 1861, and in the following autumn her husband wrote *Prospice*. It had never been his way to harp upon the theme of death, but his great sorrow then led him to contemplate calmly and steadfastly the veiled form of the King of Terrors. He deliberately asked himself the question: Do you fear death? And *Prospice* was his answer. In his later life, whilst discussing with a friend the pessimistic school of poetry that was then in vogue, he said: "Death, death, it is this harping on death that I despise so much. Why, *amico mio*, you know as well as I that death is life, just as our daily momentarily dying body is none the less alive, and ever recruiting new forces of existence. Without death, which is our churchyardy, crape-like word for change, for growth, there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. *Never say of me that I am dead.*"¹

¹ Chesterton's *Browning*, p. 130.

In *Prospice* he expressed this splendid daring in matchless verse. He imagined the whole experience of dying, and calmly, almost joyfully, accepted it. The choking fog in the throat, the blinding mist in the face, the chill of the snows, the onrush of the enemy—he depicted it all. To him the last summons sounded like a bugle-call to battle, and this was to be his best and last fight. He would not seek to be excused the experience if it were possible. He did not wish that his senses might be steeped in a merciful unconsciousness when the time came. He would rather go into the battle with every nerve tingling, every cell of his brain vividly alive. It was life's great climax, and he would know it all. It was the common experience of all earth's heroes, and he would share it. Life had been glad and bright and joyous; he was willing to strike the balance with that minute of pain and darkness and cold. He did not shrink from paying the debt he owed to Nature. For, after all, it was only a minute's experience, and it would issue in peace and light, and a glad reunion with the wife who had gone before; and beyond all there was—God!

The poem is too brief and too perfect to be mutilated by quotations. We will give it in

full, for it is one of the choicest treasures of English literature.

“Fear Death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe ;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go :
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last !
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes and
forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No ! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul ! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest ! ”

On December 12, 1889, Robert Browning died in Venice. On that same day his last collection of poems was published in London under the title *Asolando*. And so it proved

that the "Epilogue" to *Asolando* was also the epilogue to his life, and for that purpose no more fitting words could be found.

It consists of four brief verses which summarize the faith that supported his life and the message that rang through his works. In these he indicates the attitude which he would wish his friends to take towards him after he is gone. Will they, he asks, think of him in the gloomy silence of the midnight hour? Will they picture him as lying imprisoned in the grave? Remembering his love for them and their love for him, will their thought go out in pitying compassion towards the frail remains of his mortality? If so, they have utterly misconceived him. They have misread the lessons of his life. There has never been anything in common between him and the slothful, mawkish, unmanly view of life and death. That sloppy sentiment would be an appropriate tribute to some aimless, helpless, hopeless creature. But his life had been of a different order, and demanded another kind of tribute. He had ever marched forward confidently; he had cherished an unquenchable faith in right, a glad confidence in the future. He had ever believed that death was the gate of a fuller life. He had answered life's ques-

tions like the old grammarian. "Wilt thou trust Death or not? He answered, Yes."

It were disloyalty to his memory to mourn over him with melancholy thoughts at midnight. The tribute that he would ask would be that they should think of him at midday, that they should greet his warrior spirit with a cheer, that they should believe that his new life was a continuation of the old. By their love and faith and courage they should cheer him on to high endeavour in that new world where he would still be fighting God's battles and moving endlessly towards a goal far out of sight. We cannot close our study of Browning's teaching better than by describing him in his own well-known words as—

"One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,

Never doubted clouds would break,

Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong
would triumph,

Held we fall to rise are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake.

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's work-time

Greet the unseen with a cheer!

Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be
'Strive and thrive!' cry 'Speed,—fight on, fare ever
There as here!'"

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